COMPARATIVE STUDY OF PHONETIC SYSTEMS OF ARMENIAN, RUSSIAN, CHINESE AND ENGLISH LANGUAGES

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Abstract

The article covers one of the most difficult problems of modern linguistics – the phenomenon of universal sound symbolism, which has long been perceived by traditional linguistics as a peripheral phenomenon. In this study, an attempt is made to find a new approach to solving the problem of perception of the sound-symbolic properties of sounding speech. The approach is based on preliminary study and comparison of phonetic systems of four different languages. In the future, a number of studies of interlingual sound symbolism are planned based on the material of the expressive vocabulary of these languages, therefore a thorough analysis of phonetic systems seems to be a necessary stage of the study. The author focuses on the articulatory feature of sounds of the four languages and on the interpretation of the obtained results, as well as on the comparative characteristics of the vowels and consonants of the presented languages of different systems.

Keywords: Articulatory feature, iconicity, phoneme, unrelated languages, universal sound symbolism

1. Introduction

The study of the phenomenon of universal sound symbolism in a language is one of the most difficult problems of modern linguistics. The centuries-long interest in the «arbitrariness – motivation» dichotomy of a linguistic sign and in the presence of an iconic connection between sound and the meaning of a word both by language theorists and researchers who developed this problem from the perspective of other fields of knowledge, namely philosophers, logicians, psycholinguists and psychologists, contributed to the accumulation of a large amount of information on this issue. Past research (Makhaev et al., 2020; Tokmakova & Bizhoev, 2020; Zinkovskaya et al., 2020) studies cross-cultural and cross-linguistic aspects of various languages.

The difficulty of studying the phonoiconic system of language which includes onomatopoeia and sound symbolism, that is the direct object of our research, consists in the absence of a unified concept that would allow one to combine the accumulated data and give them explanatory power. This fact resulted from a number of reasons, among which one can name the sporadic nature of the study of the problem of iconicity in language, which was fading throughout the history of the development of linguistic thought and then was appearing again with renewed vigor, as well as the consideration of sound symbolism as a peripheral phenomenon by traditional linguistics. The somewhat protracted stage of theoretical research did not contribute to solving this problem, since it moved into an active experimental phase only in the middle of the 20th century with the emergence of psycholinguistics, which borrowed a rich arsenal of research methods from psychology. The unconditional achievement of psycholinguistics is the revival of interest in the study of the phonoiconic system of the language. The ability of sounds to stimulate certain associations has been proven in the psycholinguistic studies, but the question of the universality of the phenomenon of sound symbolism still remains open. Numerous studies are devoted to the search for language universalities from the psycholinguistic point of view (Arsakhanova et al., 2020; Alishina et al., 2020; Boyko, 2020; Dzakhova et al., 2020; Kiseleva & Di, 2020; Medvedeva, 2020; Mallaeva et al., 2020; Nguyen, 2020; Omakaeva et al., 2020; Sarangayeva et al., 2020; Smirnova & Zhiganova, 2020; Voiku, 2020).

2. Problem Statement

Let us draw attention to the fact that the recognition process of linguistic sound symbolism by modern science is rather difficult, since the studies' results of this phenomenon, obtained by different scientists on the material of one or two frequently only related languages, are very ambiguous.

In our opinion, the study of this phenomenon itself should be carried out in different ways and by different branches of science, since sound symbolism is a borderline object that belongs equally to the fields of general linguistics, psycholinguistics, phonosemantics, and psychology of perception. The establishment of an anthropocentric paradigm in modern science also allows us to look at the problem of studying sound symbolism in a language in a new way. Such an integrative approach meets the linguistic trends of the beginning of the 21st century and contributes to the emergence of the most complete picture of the phenomenon under study, the picture that includes both similar and sometimes contradictory facts and their assessments.

3. Research Questions

We intend:

- ▪ to analyze the phonetic systems of the Russian, English, Armenian and Chinese languages;
- ▪ to find out both similarities and differences between the vocal systems of the languages under study;
- ▪ to find out both similarities and differences between the consonant systems of the languages under study;
- ▪ to find out the unique features of the languages under study;
- ▪ to find out which consonants and vowels are full or partial matches in all the languages under study.

4. Purpose of the Study

A special role in the study of linguistic iconicity belongs to expressive vocabulary that is sufficiently represented by adjectives. Exploring iconic properties is not an easy task. During the evolution, sound-symbolic words usually lose their original semantic restriction, mixing with the words of non-phonoiconic sphere. In other words, such vocabulary has lost its primality and is based on a secondary motivation, which contributes to the secrecy of its primary sound-symbolic properties and complicates the researcher's task to identify them and the respondents' task to perceive them. The laws of the system of a particular language also make their own adjustments in the peculiarities of perception of the sound-symbolic properties of linguistic units, which impact the listener on a conscious and subconscious level. Nevertheless, we believe that the mechanism of the linguistic creation process, which emerged in ancient times, remains with its basic features to the present time, just as, essentially, the general appearance of a human and their ability to hear, see, smell, remains unchanged. Such an impact is based on the ability of sounds to cause associative connections and be perceived by a person even before the logical analysis of the lexical content of the utterance. The study of the perception of foreign language expressive vocabulary may prove to be very significant for identifying ways of «decoding» iconic information by the direct native speakers of a particular language.

The study of sound symbolism based on the material of languages of different systems, which is carried out in this research, can shed light not only on the laws of the relationship between sound and meaning, but also on some issues related to the typology of languages. It should be mentioned that from the point of view of morphological classification, it is controversial if the English language, which does not fit into the existing typological classifications, belongs to any of it. As for the genealogical classification, the status of the Armenian language is not quite clear, while its material is extremely important for clarifying the genesis and distribution of Indo-European dialects, ancient phonetic phenomena, etc.

The study of such a complex phenomenon as sound symbolism is impossible without an analysis of the phonetic systems of the languages under study. In this research, sound symbolism is studied based on the material of such languages of different systems as Russian, English, Chinese and Armenian. This work is devoted to a comparative analysis of phonetic systems of the languages listed above in order to

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find out their common and specific features, as well as to the study the perception of foreign language phonemes by Russian native speakers who do not speak foreign languages. Based on the results obtained, we plan to carry out the analysis of phonemic composition of expressive vocabulary, namely, antonymic nouns and verbs of the Chinese, English, Russian and Armenian languages.

5. Research Methods

The structure of the work demands the contrastive analysis method meaning the comparison of phonological systems of the languages under study paying attention to differences and similarities. It can be most predictive at the level of phonology. Consequently, we consider it to be the most reliable one.

6. Findings

The English and Russian languages belong to the Indo-European language family, meanwhile English is included in the Germanic branch and Russian is in the East Slavic sub-branch of the Slavic branch. It is worth noting that although the Armenian language is also commonly considered to be a part of the Indo-European language family, it stands out in a special branch, and less often is combined with the Greek and Phrygian languages. It is one of the ancient written languages among the Indo-European languages. The modern Armenian language is represented by Eastern and Western forms, which break down into many dialects. Our research is carried out based on the Eastern form of the Armenian language known as Ashkharabar, which is currently used by the population of the Republic of Armenia. The Chinese language belongs to the Sino-Tibetan family. The main means of communication between speakers of different dialects is Putonghua, the normative Chinese language. The phonetic norm is the Beijing pronunciation. From the perspective of morphological classification, the Russian language belongs to the inflected languages, Armenian belongs to the agglutinative ones, English is at the interface between the agglutinative and isolating types, and Chinese belongs to the isolating languages.

It is known that there are two systems for the classification of speech sounds, which do not exclude, but complement each other. The articulatory classification is based on constant regular movements of the speech organs, which differ in the functioning place, tension, vocal cords involvement, etc. At the core of acoustic characteristic there is the auditory impression and, according to this classification, sounds are divided into vocal/non-vocal, voiced/voiceless, consonantal/non-consonantal, high/low, etc. In order to get the most complete picture of the phonological structure of the language, it is worthwhile to take into account both classifications. In this paper, we focus on the research from the position of articulatory feature.

It is worth mentioning that the differences between the phonological systems of the Russian, English, Armenian and Chinese languages are reflected in qualitative and quantitative characteristics. The qualitative aspect reflects the uniqueness of the phonemes of a particular language. The quantitative aspect is expressed in a different ratio of the number of phonemes. It is important to remember that the number of sounds in each language may vary because different researchers may have different points of view on the status of the phoneme.

6.1. Articulatory feature. Comparison of vowel systems of the Russian, English, Armenian and Chinese languages

Vowel sounds are commonly distinguished by backness, height, length, roundedness and some other features. In the present study, special attention in the analysis of the composition of phonemes is paid to the Armenian and Chinese languages, since the studies of the Russian and English languages are widely known to linguists.

The vowel system of the Russian language includes six phonemes, which are implemented in speech by various allophones. When describing the phonemes of the Russian language, we rely on the concept of the Leningrad phonological school, since the use of the Moscow phonological school's postulates prevents the comparison of the phonemes of the languages under study. Diphthongs and diphthongoids are absent. There is no gradation within the features of height and backness of the Russian vowels. Vowels are not classified as long or short.

There are 20 vowels in the English language, divided into 8 diphthongs and 12 monophthongs, among which diphthongoids are also distinguished. In the description system of the English vowels, height is divided into narrow and broad variations. Besides front, back and central vowels there are also front-retracted and back-advanced vowels. Vowels can be long or short.

Seven characters are used to denote vowel phonemes in the Armenian language. Among the phonological features of the Armenian language, we should mention a significant change in the Indo-European phonological system at the ancient stage (V-XI centuries), namely, the loss of the difference of the vowels' length and the transition of syllabic sonants to vowels, as well as monophthongization of some diphthongs.

A significant feature of the vowel sounds of the Armenian language is height. It is divided into narrow, mid and broad variations. The backness feature has three variations: front, central and back. Vowels within the front and back position are divided into rounded and unrounded. The Armenian vowels are pronounced in the same way in all the word positions (at the beginning, the middle and the end), with and without stress, and their pronunciation is the same as in the similar Russian stressed vowels. Unlike Russian, there are nine diphthongs in the Armenian language: [je], [ji], [jo], [ju], [ai], [ei], [ie], [ja], [uj].

In the description system of the Chinese vowels, height is divided into close, middle and open. The backness feature has three variations: front, central and back, just as in the Armenian language. Vowels within all of the three backness variations are divided into rounded and unrounded. There are monophthongs [a], [i], [o], [e], [u], [u], diphthongs [ai], [ei], [ue], [ui], [ao], [ou], [ie], [iu], [ua], [uo], [ia], [io], [ue], triphthongs [iao], [uai] and apical vowel phonemes in the Chinese language. One of its specific features is the presence of the labial front vowel of the close height [u] (occurs only after five consonants – [j], [g], [x], [l], [n]) and non-labial back vowel of the middle height [e] (differs from any variant of the Russian [e], both narrow and wide). Vowels can be long or short. Vowels are contrasted in tones in the Chinese language. We consider it necessary to describe the tones in detail, as they can influence the perception of Chinese words by non-native speakers. There are four syllable tones in Putonghua. Tones are as important for discerning meaning as the sound composition of a word. The same combination of sounds conveys completely different meanings depending on the tone in which it is pronounced. The melody of the first tone is high, static and gives the impression of an unfinished statement. The melody of

the second tone is short, rapidly ascending with a maximum of tension at the end of the syllable (gives the impression of asking again). The beginning of this tone sound should be weak, while the end should be strong and the voice should ascend sharply. The melody of the third tone, with a generally low nature, has a descending-ascending form with a maximum of tension on the low part (gives the impression of a perplexed question). The melody of this tone consists of three parts: descending, static and ascending. All attention should be focused on the low static part (it is pronounced tensely).

The fourth tone is short, rapidly descending from the highest point to the lowest with a sharp weakening of tension towards the end of the syllable (gives the impression of an order). It should be mentioned that in the English, Armenian and Russian language vowels do not have tonal oppositions.

The distribution of vowel phonemes in the four languages is different. There are no restrictions on the use of vowels in the Armenian language. The same can be said about the Russian language (with the exception of the phoneme [Y] which can only be used after hard consonants). In English, an open stressed syllable can only end with a long vowel or a diphthong, and an unstressed one – with a neutral vowel [e]. In Chinese, there are restrictions on the use of vowels in a syllable.

Having compared the vowel phonemes in the Russian, English, Armenian and Chinese languages, we identified the following specific features.

1.The unique feature of the phonetic composition of the Russian language is the presence of a vowel of the central backness and the front height [Y].

2.For the English language, the diphthongs [ɛə], [ou] and monophthongs [ǽ], [ə], [ɜː] are specific. The analogues of some English diphthongs are also present in the Armenian language, but it should be kept in mind that the articulatory and acoustic features of phonemes in each of the languages have their own characteristics.

3.The phonetic system of vowels of the Chinese language has the following distinctive features:

a) the presence of tonal oppositions, which is not typical of the other languages under study;

b) the presence of diphthongs, triphthongs and apical vowel phonemes;

c) the restrictions on the use of vowels in a syllable, regulated by the rules. This applies to a special Chinese vowel – the final, which is pronounced with a consonant «insignificant sound». The rule is that this vowel occurs only after hard hushing sounds [zh], [ch], [sh], [r] and sibilants [z], [c], [x]. When pronouncing this sound, the same position of the tongue remained as when pronouncing the previous consonant, only the gap slightly increases. There are two combinatorial varieties of this vowel: with a hushing sound (after [zh], [ch], [sh], [r]) and with a sibilant sound (after [s], [c], [r]);

d) the presence of a front sound [ü] and a non-labial back vowel of the mid height [e].

4.The Armenian language is characterized by the presence of some specific diphthongs that have no analogues among other languages under study, namely [ji], [je], [uj], [ja], [ju]. The diphthong [uj] is similar to the French [ui] in the word «grenuille» (frog). In general, the pronunciation of the Armenian vowels is similar with the pronunciation of the Russian stressed vowels.

Some similarities can be seen in all four languages at once.

6.2. Comparative characteristics of the consonant systems of the Russian, English, Armenian and Chinese languages

The languages under study differ in the number of consonant phonemes: there are 24 phonemes in English, 34 in Russian, 22 in Chinese, and 31 in Armenian. The articulation of consonants in these languages is similar, which is expressed in the presence of obstruents, fricatives, affricates and sonorants, but there are differences in the place of articulation. From the perspective of the articulation zones, a great variety is observed in the consonants of the Chinese, Armenian and English languages. The consonants of the Chinese language are divided into bilabial, labiodental, dorsal, apico-alveolar, apico-alveolar sibilants, cacuminal hushing, palatal and velar consonants. The consonants of the English language are divided into bilabial, labiodental, interdental, apico-alveolar, cacuminal, palatal, velar and pharyngeal consonants. Armenian consonants are usually divided into bilabial, labiodental, apico-alveolar, palatal, velar, pharyngeal and uvular consonants. In the Russian language there are no pharyngeal, cacuminal and interdental consonants, and coronal phonemes correspond to the apico-alveolar one.

All the above features of the consonant systems of the Russian, English, Armenian and Chinese languages are presented as follows: the phonemes of English are presented in square brackets, Russian ones are in round brackets, Armenian ones are in oblique, Chinese are presented without brackets.

7. Conclusion

We can assume that there are both similarities and differences between the consonant systems of these languages.

1. The difference in the intensity of articulation is worth mentioning for the Russian and Chinese languages: Chinese consonants are assessed as weak, and Russian – as strong. Armenian and English consonants are also characterized by intense articulation.

2. Due to the differentiation of the vocal cords patterns, the consonants in the Russian and English languages implement voiced and voiceless consonants, while in Chinese the consonants implement unaspirated (weak, voiceless, half-voiced) consonants and aspirated consonants, which are voiceless.

3. In the Chinese and Armenian languages there is no opposition between hard and soft consonants, while in the Russian and English languages there is such a correlation.

4. Only consonants m – (m), f – (f), h – (h) completely coincide in all characteristics in the Chinese and Russian languages. In English, Russian and Armenian, full compliance can be found in the following consonants: [p] – [b] – (p)– (b), [k] – [g] – (к) – (g), [f] – [v] – (f) – (v), [m] – [м]. Thus, from the perspective of the method and place of articulation only two consonants coincide in all the languages under study – [m] – [м] and [f] – [ф].

5. Significantly more consonants coincide partially. Speaking about the Chinese and Russian languages, these are, first of all, consonants, that are similar in the place and the method of production, but are opposed in Russian in voicing/voicelessness, and in Chinese – in the presence/lack of aspiration: [б – п] – [b – p], (g – k) – [g – k]. In the Armenian language there is the opposition both in voicing/voicelessness and the presence/lack of aspiration: [p – b – p(h)], [t – d – t(h)], [k – g – k(h)], while in the English language the opposition in voicing/voicelessness is implemented: [f] – [v], [s] – [z].

6. Sounds that coincide in the way of the constriction formation and the participation of the voice in articulation, but differ in the place of production can be called partial matches. These include:

a) occlusive coronal dental consonants in the Russian language, occlusive apico-alveolar in the Chinese and English languages, and occlusive alveolar in the Armenian – (d – t) – [d – t];

b) [n], [l] – (n), (l) that are fricatives by the way of the constriction formation, but apico-alveolar in the English, Armenian and Chinese languages and dental coronal in Russian by the place of production;

c) dorsal fricatives in Russian, alveolar cacuminal in Chinese and apico-alveolar in the Armenian and English languages: (sh-zh) – [sh – r] – [∫ и з];

d) a [c] ([s]) fricative, that is dorsal in Russian, but apico-alveolar in the Chinese, English and Armenian languages;

e) a (ts) affricate, that is dorsal in Russian, apico-alveolar in Chinese and Armenian ([c]), but has no analogue in the English language;

f) a (ch) affricate, that is coronal in Russian, alveolar cacuminal in Chinese and velar in Armenian, but has no analogue in the English language.

7. There are no matches of such Russian consonants as the voiced fricatives (v), (z), voiced apico-alveolar trill sonant [p] and obstruent fricative [sh'] in the Chinese language.

There are no matches of the following consonants in Russian: palatal affricates [j], [q] and a fricative [x]; two coronal affricates, that are apico-alveolar [z] and cacuminal [zh], as well as velar nasal sonant [ng]. These consonant sounds also have no analogues in the Armenian and English languages. The alveolar orientation of the Chinese consonants can be considered unique.

The interdental occlusive sonants [ð], [ɵ] are unique to the English language as well as the central fricative sonant [r]. The following consonants are unique to the Armenian language: occlusive aspirated bilabial [p(h)], occlusive aspirated apico-alveolar [t(h)], occlusive aspirated velar [k(h)], apico-alveolar aspirated affricate [ts(h)], velar aspirated affricate [t∫(h)], fricative obstruent voiced velar [з] and two uvular sounds: fricative obstruent voiced [я] and fricative obstruent voiceless [x]. There are no analogues of the three variations of the Armenian alveolar sound [r] in any of the languages under study (trill hard, flap soft and approximant). There is a tendency towards an alveolar orientation of consonants in the Armenian language, as well as in Chinese.

One of the main aspects of the typological characteristics of phonemes is the phenomenon of neutralization. The vowels of the English language are not neutralized: the voiced phonemes at the end of the word only partially lose their voicing. The Russian language is characterized by the neutralization, when voiced consonants tend to become voiceless in the final position of the word, and voiceless consonants become voiced due to the subsequent voiced consonant. There is no neutralization in the Chinese language, since the consonants are opposed by aspiration and not by voicing. The consonants (b) – (p), (d) – (t), (g) – (k) sound the same for native Chinese speakers. There is no phenomenon of neutralization in the Armenian language, except for the historically established positions, where voiced consonants are pronounced without voicing and with aspiration.

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