Pragmatic potential of onomatopoeia in animated movies for children

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Abstract

This paper reflects the results of the investigation into pragmatic potential of onomatopoeia as a part of children's movies. The enquiry into this subject was conducted within the framework of the project devoted to the evolution and functioning of language within films for children. The paper includes the analysis of onomatopoeia through language development aspects, stylistic and pragmatic analysis. In this regard our attention is focused on the semantic, pragmatic and linguistic characteristics of onomatopoeia. It has been suggested that the onomatopoeia performs different functions within the children's movies acting as a strong expressive component, reflecting the level of speech development, conveying emotions, describing nature, supporting musical mood in songs, attracts child's attention to the most important character or event, forming new hybrid words to convey extra connotations, participating in wordplay such as pun or parody, developing mental activity, linguistic intuition and social communicative skills.

Keywords: Onomatopoeia, language development, pragmatic potential, semantic and functional feature, animated movies for children.

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1. Introduction

Contemporary linguistic studies pay special attention to texts designed for young audience which can make a great influence on their personality, account for language development and the formation of world image. This interest is proved true by the increasing number of recent theoretical works in culture studies, stylistics, semantics and the theory of communication. In some latest studies, animated movie discourse is considered to be the most promising and showing a great potential for further investigation. Linguistic perspective of the world is formed by the specific environment which surrounds a child from the very moment of birth. The process of formation is under the influence of various texts and in particular the texts of animated movies for children. A great number of animated movies, which are wanted and liked by children, indicate the pragmatic potential of these works. In the last two decades, the number of TV channels showing films for children has grown substantially along with internet channels providing plenty of interactive games. The illocutionary force of the spoken text affecting young audience is so high that it now determines children's preferences in toys (action figures and toy cars), outfit, books and even food. Moreover, we can hear our children cite their favourite movie characters, and they always do it with feelings and taste. Our research comprises the ontolinguistic specifics of the texts within animated movies for children, and more precisely, the pragmatic potential of onomatopoeic words that are very typical within this particular movie discourse. Within this paper, we aim to investigate the pragmatic role of onomatopoeia from the viewpoint of its semantic, pragmatic and linguistic characteristics.

The research has been carried out on the base of more than 100 popular animated movies for children, mostly shown on such TV channels as JimJam, Tiny Pop, Nickelodeon Junior and Nickelodeon and full-length animated movies by Disney company, DreamWorks and Nickelodeon.

1.1. Onomatopoeia and language development

Onomatopoeia is regarded as a common phenomenon found in all languages of the world, which proves its importance in language development (Anderson, 1998). It is important to evaluate pragmatic potential of onomatopoeia as a linguistic phenomenon performing its dominant function of children's speech development through animated movies for children.

In developmental linguistics onomatopoeia Regarding stylistic aspects of animated movies for children it should be mentioned that the onomatopoeia is mostly used by a cartoon character, so it helps to create a special image of the character that is recognised in his speech, manners and attitudes. A cartoon character is regarded as a representative of its country existing only as an integral part of cultural heritage created by its people. Within the context of animated movie for children, onomatopoeia is an integral part of character's speech reflecting language awareness of its targeted audience. During the character creating process, numerous challenges are faced, such as psychological and cognitive specifics regarding the age of the audience, moral and cultural values, educational standards and others. In spite of the variety of fundamental works investigating onomatopoeia in fiction, the issues of text in animated movies for children still have the room for investigation.

1.2. Phonological specifics of onomatopoeia

Contemporary linguistics recognises the significant value of pragmatic potential of the phonological structure of lullabies, children songs, rhymes and fairytales. The impact of phonological contribution to the text formation is important for children being in a process of acquiring all the mysteries and depths of their mother tongue's phonology. Such stylistic devices as repetitions, neologisms, nonsense, sounds imitating objects, birds and animals are both typical and important for children works.

The value of this subject for further investigation is also recognised by Leanne Hinton, an emeritus professor of linguistics at the University of California at Berkeley, the USA. 'In true onomatopoeia, the word is directly shaped by the sound it represents. That is to say, there is some fairly direct mapping

between the acoustic features of the sound itself and the phonological features of the word that labels the sound' (Hinton, Nicols & Ohala, 2006). 'Onomatopoeia being a class of words designed to imitate all sorts of sounds that may be heard in the world surrounding us is by definition a very abundant source of data for linguists looking for sound-symbolic connections between words and their referents' (Zuchowski, 1998).

Onomatopoeias have various sound forms in different languages, still 'they conform to some extent to the broader linguistic system they are part of' (Bredin, 1996). A Russian researcher Voronin (1990; 2004) gives a detailed description of onomatopoeia and its linguistic functions. According to Voronin (1990; 2004), onomatopoeia comprises words that reproduce non-verbal sounds using the combination of the according segments with sound form that can refer to the sounds uttered in actual speech (Trask, 1996). Onomatopoeia represents phonetic devices that serve to increase both artistic and stylistic expressiveness in texts. Within linguistic stylistics, onomatopoeia performs its function of emphasis of artificial expressiveness in texts (Lukyanova & Koloskova, 2018). Tikhonov (1981) refers to onomatopoeia as a separate grammatical category.

The comparative analysis of examples of onomatopoeia reveals that the number of onomatopoeic words in fiction literature for children considerably exceeds their number in animated movies. It can be explained by the animation specifics: the smaller number of the onomatopoeic lexical units is compensated by visual and sound non-verbal effects that in combination can make a greater impression on the audience than a book on the readers and listeners (in case of pre-school children, who are not able to read yet).

1.3. Ontolinguistic approach

Recent advances in language research have been characterised by emphasis on relating language to other phenomena. The issues of acquiring English as a mother tongue are still important (Crystal, 1997). Ontolinguistic approach in linguistic investigation has successfully been implemented in works devoted to children's animated movie investigation (Lukyanova & Koloskova, 2018). In this paper, phonostylistic research of more than 100 animated movies shows that the number of the examples of onomatopoeia that can be found in the movies for the audience with recommended age from 0 to 3–5 years old is approximately the same as in the movies for children from 3–5 to 10–12 years old and from 10–12 to 16–17 years old. The differences are mostly within the semantics and stylistics. For the youngest audience (aged from 0 to 3–5), onomatopoeic words bear mostly direct meanings, they do not have any additional connotations, are used repeatedly, especially when a song is performed: 'The wheels of the bus go swish-swish-swish' in 'Peppa Pig' (2004). The older group of the audience (aged from 3–5 from 10–12 years old) is offered a more complicated type of onomatopoeia that contains more connotations performing a greater number of stylistic functions, such as irony, puns and allusions, e.g., in the Disney movie 'Aladdin' (1991) after being swindled, Genie says: 'Ok, ba-a-a-ad boy. But no more freebies'. The irony is supported by the visual component of the scene, where Genie says his line having turned into a sheep. This creates a pun based on the adjective bad and onomatopoeic word baa—a typical sheep sound. As a result, we get a very humorous and extraordinary character. The eldest group (from 10–12 to 16–17 years old) combines the cognitive and emotional features of both children and adults due to the specifics of their emotional and language development: they have already developed analytical and critical thinking and attitude, yet they experience challenges when there is a need to be patient, steady and calm. Overreactions are common in their behaviour. They like acerbic humour, complicated structures and terms in speech. They are keener to use onomatopoeia when expressing negative emotions, e.g., in the movie 'Rio' (2011) the main character named Blue expresses his emotions saying: 'I hate samba! … Every song sounds exactly the same. Tico-taco, ya-ya-ya! Tico-taco, ya-ya-ya! Urrgh! I'm tico-taco outta here'. This example shows the layers of onomatopoeic lexeme tico-taco that conveys the sounds of the rhythm of the dance, and his intention to leave the place moving with the rhythm of the dance because he is tired and upset (I tico-taco out of here). The onomatopoeic elements are

supported by a number of repeated words and phonemes to contribute to the stylistic and pragmatic impact.

Within movies for this age category, onomatopoeia can also perform a function of a separate language that is often used for ironic purposes, e.g., in the movie 'The New Emperor's Groove' (1993) the character called Kronk asks his students to translate the sentence into 'Squirrel language':

Kronk: 'Did you eat the acorn?'

Students: 'Squeaker, squeak, squeak, squeakin'?'

Flexies -er, - ing refer to the existence of certain grammar rules.

In the movie 'Rio' (2011), a character being upset and angry after the loss of her beloved parrot exclaims: 'This is your fault! … Well, you know what? Squawk, squawkety, squawk, squawk! Haah!... I'm sorry! I didn't mean to curse!' Here we can see that the speaker loves her pet parrot so much that she defies his sounds as a language and regards his language as her own, which makes her apologise for cursing in bird's language.

2. Results

Evaluating the results of this research, we divided all the chosen and analysed cases of onomatopoeia into the following five groups on the basis of their semantic and pragmatic functions:

• True onomatopoeia, i.e., words which imitate certain actions or phenomena.

In animated movie 'Peppa Pig' (2004) in the episode called 'Grandpa's Little Train' the main character makes up a parody on the song 'The Wheels of the Bus': Grandpa's little train goes Choo, choo, choo. Choo, choo, choo… all day long. In the given example the imitation of the train sound functions as the core of the parody.

They can also convey a description of nature. In 'Bambi' (1942), there is a song about a spring rain: 'Drip, drip, drop/Little April shower/Beating a tune/As you fall all around…' which supports the scene and the music praising the beauty of nature.

Onomatopoeic words are sometimes used to imitate a foreign language. The meaning of a foreign word can be expressed both explicitly and implicitly. In the movie 'Rio' (2011), the main character barks to scare off a cat and then boasts in front of his companion: 'Woof-woof!.. See? I'm bilingual, too!' In this scene, onomatopoeia is uttered so similar to real dog sounds that it may be regarded an implicit expression. The lexeme 'bilingual' indicates that real words from another language were used.

Sometimes true onomatopoeia functions as a stylistic device called pun owing to its phonemic similarity to another word. In the movie 'Tinkerbell and the Lost Treasure' (2009) there is a scene where one of the characters Terrence complains to wise Mr. Owl:

Terrence: I know she's under a lot of pressure, but she shouldn't have treated me that way. She should apologise.

Owl: Hoo? [in subtitles it is spelled as a pronoun 'who']

Terrence: Tink. This is her fault.

Owl: Hoo?

Terrence: Me. Thank you so much, Mr. Owl.

Though Terrence believes that a substantial conversation has taken place, in the next scene, when another character approaches for consultation, we see that 'who' is the only word uttered by the owl and it is not an expression of doubt, but just a typical owl sound 'hoo'.

- Words formed on the basis of sound imitation, which are usually less expressive in terms of their phonemic features than true onomatopoeia.

Thus, in the cartoon 'Ben and Holly's Little Kingdom' (2009) in the episode 'King Thistle is not well' little characters try to settle an unpleasant situation: Daddy, you've blown our cards over. Now I'm sneezing, and I've got a stuffed up nose.—Now look up, look down and wiggle your feet. Now flap your arms like a bird and whistle. The words in bold phonetically remind the actions they denote but, since they are commonly used in everyday speech, the impression produced by these words is less vivid and emotionally coloured.

- Sound-like words represented by lexemes in which the meaning is partially predetermined by their sound image.

In the animated movie 'Peppa Pig' (2004) in the episode 'Santa's Grotto', a child orders a New Year present by asking Santa to bring him 'Tiddlywinks'.

The sound image of the word 'tiddlywinks' is rather emphatic and immediately conveys a bright and meaningful idea of the described concept. In fact, this word denotes an old competitive indoor game for both children and adults, in which small hard discs called 'winks' are made to jump up and propel into the air to get into the pot. The very name of the game suggests an image of something small, winking and flickering.

- Anthroponymic words revealing individual features of a character.

They are often used when naming anthropomorphic animals. Thus, in the cartoon 'Bambi' (1942), there is a bunny called Thumper. The name creates an image of someone who enjoys thumpering and the name of a famous fairy Tinkerbell in the similarly named movie 'Disney Fairies. Tinkerbell' (2005) combines the connotation of tinkering sound of the bell, and her beloved occupation of tinkering and engineering.

- Occasional neologisms represented as blends combining an onomatopoeia and a shortened word.

In the animated series 'Tickety-Toc' (2012) an exclamation 'Moovellous!' made by an anthropomorphic cow is a repeated neologism constructed by an onomatopoeia moo inserted into the word 'marvellous'. Anthroponymic words can also be a blended neologism like bunny's name Hopporoo consisting of two lexemes 'hop' and 'kangaroo' in 'Tickety-Toc' (2012)

Stylistic functions of onomatopoeia within animated movies for children are quite various. One of the aspects which seems to be worth considering is the contextual functioning of sound imitation lexemes in cartoons according to Prihodko (2008, p. 19].

Onomatopoeia is often used in such stylistic device as pun. Like any other stylistic device, it is always context-dependent. The cartoon 'Alice in Wonderland' (1951) shows a scene in the garden where flowers explain the way they are protected by the oak to Alice: 'It could bark. It says 'Bough-wough' ... That's why its branches are called 'boughs'. In this context, the word 'bough' is deliberately used in two different meanings. It imitates the sound of barking in the first part and has the meaning 'branch' in the second part of the utterance, which leads to the intended humorous and rhetorical effect.

Adding sound imitating lexemes to characters' speech within animated movies contributes to more vivid depiction of their personality, sometimes defining the most typical and distinctive traits which set the speaker apart from all the others and stick to the memory of little viewers. Thus, onomatopoeia becomes a familiar and easily recognisable characteristic and in these terms is very similar to typical interjections, lullabies and gestures. In the cartoon 'Kung Fu Panda' (2008), the main character, Panda Po, shouts out the same battle cry every time he starts his bizarre combat maneuver, which produces an unforgettable hilarious impression on the viewers. The battle cry sounds like 'Ska-doosh!!!'. The onomatopoeia in this example is an independable utterance which is self-sufficient and is used outside any other context. It may seem that it could be easily omitted without any loss to the main content of the movie, but the sound expressiveness and the desired impact would be seriously harmed.

Another distinctive feature of onomatopoeia considered in the framework of its functioning within animated discourse is the fact that 'talking' anthroponyms are often formed on the bases of onomatopoeia. Most cartoon characters have concise and at the same time impressive names derived from sound imitating lexemes. In the animated children's television series 'Jungle Junction' (2009), there is a character named Zooter. It is an energetic pink pig who is the jungle messenger and that is why he is constantly riding his scooter. The name is a compound of two words 'zoo' or 'zip' and 'scooter'. The cartoon features a story of little animals who ride the jungle on small wheels. As a result, the name supports the stylistic image of the whole movie suggesting the sound of a small wheeled vehicle.

Another animated children's television series, 'Doc McStuffins' (2012) depicts a character called Squeakers. This toy looks like a blowfish and can go under the water. It belongs to a girl named Dottie. The fish can't talk but it can squeak. One more animated sitcom 'The Flintstones' (1994) shows a little boy called Bamm-Bamm Rubble. He is extraordinarily strong and his favourite pastime is to hammer different objects with his club so that the whole house quakes. The name also reflects a specific characteristic of his speech development as the only phrase he ever speaks as a baby is 'Bamm, Bamm!'

The results of the research of onomatopoeia through functional semantics and ontolinguistics contribute to better linguistic understanding of this phenomenon. They can also support practical work in translating animated movies into foreign languages, e.g. into Russian (Lukyanova & Gajdul, 2018) and underpin certain aspects of cross-cultural linguistic studies.

3. Conclusion

It should be concluded that the linguistic phenomenon of English onomatopoeia within the animated movie discourse reveals very valuable pragmatic potential. This issue has not received enough attention in linguistic research and is still subject for further investigation. The situation is mostly explained by the naive and primitive features of the texts in cartoons. And yet, the results of this paper clearly demonstrate significance of pragmatic potential of onomatopoeia in animated movies for children. Sound imitating words make an important contribution to the expressiveness of the language, reflecting the stage of speech development of a young viewer. In the works for the youngest group of audience onomatopoeic lexemes lack additional connotations and are mostly used in repetitions. For the middle age group, they are used in various connotations represented by irony, puns and allusions. In the animated works for the oldest group, the pragmatic role changes. They are used in acerbic humour to express negative emotions and become a part of more complicated puns. Thus, onomatopoeic words help to convey emotions, feelings and senses properly. They contribute to creating the verbal image of characters, describe nature, support in the targeted musical mood formation within songs, attract child's attention to the most valuable moments of the plot and can also be implemented within different forms of word play such as pun or parody.

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