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## On the position of onomatopoeia in adult language. Evidence from Slovak<sup>1</sup>

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Onomatopoeic expressions are usually defined as verbal imitations of the sounds from the extra-linguistic reality. The position of onomatopoeia in languages varies cross-linguistically. In standard Slovak, onomatopoeia represents a sub-category of interjections. Onomatopoeic words are considered an important part of child's vocabulary due to their sound-imitative nature and simple structure, but their role in language of the adults is not clear. The study presents the results of the research aimed at the analysis of the place of onomatopoeia in language of adult native Slovak language speakers. The research was carried out on the basis of two questionnaires in which the respondents were asked to (1) identify the sound imitated by the given onomatopoeia, that is, to identify the meaning of the onomatopoeia and (2) to capture the sound they heard by an existing lexicalized onomatopoeia. The research results indicate that although standard Slovak is a language relatively rich in lexicalized onomatopoeic expressions, adult natives are not very familiar with their meaning. Most of the respondents could not identify the sound mimicked by the given onomatopoeia and were not able to capture the sound by the existing lexicalized sound-imitating word. This finding supports the views about the marginal position of onomatopoeia in adult language.

**Keywords:** sound-imitating expressions, lexicalized onomatopoeia, adult speech, standard Slovak

### 1. Introduction

Following Saussurean approach to language, the relationship between form and meaning in language system is governed by two semiotic principles: iconic-symbolic (with symmetry between form and meaning) and arbitrary (with dominant asymmetry between form and meaning). These two principles create the basis for one of the dominant binary oppositions connected with the function of language units: motivation (the sphere of the iconic-symbolic semiotic principle) and non-motivation (the sphere of an arbitrary

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semiotic principle) (Sabol & Zimmermann 2014: 145-146). “The motivated connection between form and meaning” represents the grounding for “sound symbolic phenomena, including also onomatopoeia” (Körtvélyessy 2020: 512). Although onomatopoeia – verbal imitations of the sounds around us – is “relatively late in origin” (Sadler 1971: 75), the theory of onomatopoeia is considered vague and unstable from the very beginning of its appearance in the times of Quintilian and Plato, that is, from the times of Ancient Greek (Bredin 1996: 556) thus generating “as much diversity as it does today” (ibid.). In the past, it seemed (perhaps as a consequence of this *diversity*) that onomatopoeia was somehow neglected in theoretical account of languages. Nevertheless, much has been written about this issue in the last decades. Looking at miscellaneous sources, it is obvious that the question of onomatopoeia is approached from various perspectives: from the viewpoint of the theories of sound symbolism, through the concentration on the semantics of onomatopoeia, and the classification on the basis of lexical categories and word-classes up to the focus on the position of onomatopoeia in communication, etc. (see, e.g., Bredin 1996, Sasamoto & Jackson 2016, Körtvélyessy 2020 or Andričič 2021 for further details). Most of linguists agree that the degree to which onomatopoeia echoes the sound from the extra-linguistic reality is different in different languages depending on the restrictions given by the phonemic structure of a language (in languages, there is limited number of speech sounds/phonemes contrary to the unlimited number of various sounds around us), the restrictions resulting from the anatomy of human speech organs, as well as on the limitations imposed by human perception of sounds (Bredin 1996: 559). It is clear that “natural resemblance” is overestimated and that onomatopoeia is determined by convention (ibid.). Simpson (2004) divides onomatopoeia into two categories: lexical onomatopoeia and non-lexical onomatopoeia. “Lexical onomatopoeia draws upon recognized words in the language system, words like *thud*, *crack*, *slurp* and *buzz*, whose pronunciation enacts symbolically their referents outside language. Nonlexical onomatopoeia, by contrast, refers to clusters of sounds which echo the world in a more unmediated way, without the intercession of linguistic structure” (Simpson 2004: 67). In other words, lexical onomatopoeia, as the part of language system, is conventionalized, that is institutionalized, and its meaning (the sound it imitates) can be found in dictionary. Non-lexical onomatopoeia is created ad hoc by a language user when there is a necessity to mimic a sound and some linguists call them onomatopoeic neologisms (cf., e.g., Abelin 2006). Morphological classification of onomatopoeia varies cross-linguistically, too. For example, in Japanese, onomatopoeic expressions are usually adverbs, in Arabic, onomatopoeic words are mainly nouns (see, e.g., Jahdhami 2020 for further details), etc. As to the function of onomatopoeia in the process of communication, onomatopoeic expressions are judged as marginal to adult everyday speech. They are assumed to play an important role in the stylistic texture of poetry (Simpson 2004: 67) and they are said to represent an essential part of the infant speech in languages (see, e.g., Laing 2014).

## 2. Onomatopoeia in standard Slovak

In Slovak, the information about onomatopoeia is very limited. Some notes on these expressions can be found in grammars and textbooks on morphology and lexicology. In the Slovak linguistic theory, onomatopoeia is understood as a special type of interjections<sup>2</sup> due to the phonological, morphological and syntactic features (Körtvélyessy 2020). The detailed account of the phonic structure of the Slovak onomatopoeia can be found in Körtvélyessy (2020). The author comes to the conclusion that taking into account (1) the frequency of phonemes and (2) consonants combinations, there are no significant differences between onomatopoeia and the rest of the lexicon in the analyzed language (Körtvélyessy 2020: 528-542). Nevertheless, the communicative value of onomatopoeia turns to be different comparing to the rest of vocabulary. In Slovak, onomatopoeic expressions are regarded as a special class of child's vocabulary (cf., e. g., Kičura-Sokolová 2017). They are seen as “the simplest words adults intuitively use in communication with children in an attempt to simplify their utterance and to accommodate it to the psycholinguistic capacity of a child. At the same time, they belong among the first words a child can enounce, because they require less articulatory abilities [...]” (Ondráčková 2008: 131). This observation is in accordance with Pauliny's (1981) view that onomatopoeia – by its function and by its form – represents “the most archaic part of the vocabulary of human speech” (Pauliny 1981: 23). It is the articulatory processed relict of the sound means of the first signal system (ibid.). What follows from this is that onomatopoeia plays an important role in the process of child language acquisition. However, there is no systematic account of the role of onomatopoeic expressions in adult speech. Some authors indicate the possible stylistic use of onomatopoeia in poetry (see. e.g., Sabol & Zimmermann 2014). But the question of the use of onomatopoeia in everyday communication remains unanswered.

In standard Slovak, there is a number of lexicalized onomatopoeic expressions. These words and the explanations of their meaning can be found in *Krátky slovník slovenského jazyka* (*The short dictionary of the Slovak language*) and/or in *Slovník súčasného slovenského jazyka* (*The dictionary of the contemporary Slovak language*). Both dictionaries are available also online at the dictionary portal of the Ľudovít Štúr Institute of Linguistics of the Slovak Academy of Sciences (*Slovníkový portál* n.d.). For example, the onomatopoeia *mňau* ‘miau’ is delimited as a word that “imitates the sound of a cat”. Similar to other languages (cf., e.g., Laing 2014), onomatopoeic words are very frequent in child's literature. Nevertheless, as my personal longitudinal observation of a child between the age 0 – 5 years shows, the onomatopoeic expressions occur in the child's vocabulary only when the adults approaching the child use them in their communication with the baby and as the result of the influence of fairy-tales and rhymes for children. Moreover, sitting in the garden and listening to the sounds of various birds around me,

<sup>2</sup> In standard Slovak, word-classes are either flecional (they have declension or conjugation), these are nouns, adjectives, pronouns, numerals and verbs, or inflectional – adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions and particles. A special category of the so-called amorphous word-class is represented by interjections divided into interjections of their own, for example, *ach* ‘ah’, *fuj* ‘phooey’, and onomatopoeic words, for example, *bác* ‘bang’ or *hav* ‘bow-wow’ (Ondruš & Sabol 1987: 169-174).

I do not think that the sound a sparrow produces is really *čvirik* or *čimčara* although these expressions are believed to be the imitations of the sound of a sparrow in dictionaries and these are the expressions used in child's poems about sparrows<sup>3</sup>. Consequently, I decided to carry out a research, to look in detail at the position of onomatopoeia in adult language. The aim of the research, its methodology, as well as the results of my investigation will be presented in the following parts of the paper.

### 3. Research aim and methodology

The research, or better to say the research probe, was carried out on the sample of 30 native Slovak language speakers aged between 21 and 30 years, including both males and females. All respondents are university students of translation and interpretation or the graduates of this study programme. The aim of the research was the find out what is the place of lexicalized onomatopoeia in the vocabulary of adult Slovak language speakers. In particular, I aimed to discover (1) whether adult natives are familiar with the meaning of all Slovak onomatopoeic words as it is in case of non-onomatopoeic vocabulary, and (2) whether one and the same sound from the extra-linguistic reality will be noted down by one and the same onomatopoeic expression by all native Slovak language speakers and (3) whether the onomatopoeia provided by the individual respondents is identical with the lexicalized (conventionalized) onomatopoeia for the given sound.

Two questionnaires were prepared for the purposes of the analysis. In Questionnaire 1 (Q1), there were 20 onomatopoeic expressions covering three basic categories of sounds from the extra-linguistic reality: (1) sounds of animals and birds, (2) sounds of human beings and (3) sounds of various instruments. The selection of the onomatopoeic words for the analysis was quite random. I endeavoured to avoid the expressions I consider well-known due to their frequent occurrence in communication with children. For example, *hav* 'bow-wow' or *mňau* 'meow'. The respondents were asked to identify the sound captured by the given expression. The onomatopoeic words were provided without context or any other further specification. All those expressions occur in dictionaries (cf. *Slovníkový portál* n.d.), as well as in the Slovak National Corpus (cf. *Korpus* n.d.). The English version of the full form of the Questionnaire 1 can be found in the Appendix.

In Questionnaire 2 (Q 2), the respondents were asked to note down the sound they hear, that is, to write down the sound in terms of the word, the onomatopoeic expression. The Questionnaire 2 – similarly to the Questionnaire 1 – contains 20 sounds falling into three categories: (1) sounds of animals and birds, (2) sounds produced by human beings and (3) miscellaneous sounds from the extra-linguistic reality. The choice of sounds for the research probe was based on one criterion – the quality of the recorded sound so as the sound could be easily identified by the hearer/respondent. In standard Slovak, there is lexicalized onomatopoeia for all sounds included in the Questionnaire 2. The full version of Q 2 can also be found in the Appendix.

<sup>3</sup> I am a native speaker of the Slovak language.

## 4. Research results and discussion

### 4. 1. The analysis of the answers in Questionnaire 1

The overall results of the Q1 are captured in Table 1. Apparently, the respondents were able to identify the meaning (i.e., the sound imitated by the given onomatopoeia) in approximately 1/3 of cases. All onomatopoeia with 90 – 100% answers in accordance with the dictionary meaning mimics either the sound produced by animals/birds (*kvík*, *brum*, *iá*, *huhú*) or the sounds of human beings (*hapčí*, *grg*). Language users get in contact with those expressions in early childhood in the process of language acquisition and two of them – *hapčí*, *grg* – are quite frequent in everyday informal communication as evidenced by the corpus occurrence of these expressions (cf. *Korpus* n.d.). In case of approximately 1/3 of onomatopoeia, the occurrence of correct answers is between 50 – 80%. A certain degree of ambiguity in the delimitation of the meaning of the expressions *vřř* and *buch* can be explained by the polysemantic character of the words and their more general dictionary delimitation (see Table 1). However, the diversity in the identification of sounds imitated by the expressions *hudry*, *čvirik*, *hrkú* and *cukrú* is a surprise, because their lexicalized meaning is quite clear-cut (Table 1) and all the expressions display relatively high frequency of occurrence in child's literature (my personal observation). The last third of onomatopoeia manifests the highest variability in the identification of echoed sounds, sometimes with more than five different answers, as can be seen in Table 1. These findings indicate that although in language, there are lexicalized (conventionalized, institutionalized) onomatopoeic expressions with lucidly specified meaning, the expressions do not appear to be the indivisible part of the active vocabulary of adult language users. Respondents could have been in touch with onomatopoeia in early childhood when getting in contact with mother tongue, but later when those expressions were not frequently used in everyday communication, they were shifted to the periphery of one's lexicon and the sound they are to imitate became misty.

Table 1: The results of the Questionnaire 1

Onomato- poeie	Convencionalised/ dictionary meaning(s)	Meaning(s) identified by respondents	Number of answers (in percent)
kvík, kvík	imitates the sound of a pig	1. imitates the sound of a pig	100
vřř	imitates the sound of some animals, devices, etc.	1. imitates the sound of growling of a dog/wolf/bear/cat 2. imitates the sound of a drill 3. imitates the sound of an engine	80 12 8

brum, brum	1. imitates the sound of some musical instruments 2. imitates the sound of the grumbling of a bear	1. imitates the sound of a bear	100
já	imitates the sound of a donkey	1. imitates the sound of a donkey 2. imitates the sound of a horse	92 8
hudry, hudry	imitates the sound of a turkey	1. imitates the sound of a turkey 2. imitates the sound of murmuring 3. imitates the sound of an owl	84 12 4
čvirik	imitates twittering of some birds, especially of a sparrow	1. imitates the sound of a bird 2. imitates the sound of a sparrow	80 20
hrkú	imitates the sound of a pigeon	1. imitates the sound of a pigeon 2. imitates the sound of a turtle-dove	84 16
cukrú	imitates the sound of a turtle-dove	1. imitates the sound of a turtle-dove 2. imitates the sound of a pigeon 3. I do not know 4. imitates the sound of a pigeon	56 16 16 12
čimčara	imitates twittering of a sparrow	1. imitates the sound of a sparrow 2. imitates the sound of a bird 3. I do not know 4. imitates the sound of a musical instrument	36 36 20 4
huhú	imitates the sound of an owl	1. imitates the sound of an owl 2. imitates the sound of a trumpet	96 4
fác	expresses fast or unexpected blow to the face, to the head, slapping	1. imitates the sound of slapping 2. imitates the sound of hitting 3. imitates the sound of smacking 4. I do not know	40 24 20 16
plesk	1. imitates the sound of slapping on the head 2. imitates the sharp impact, hitting	1. imitates the sound of clapping 2. imitates the sound of banging 3. imitates the sound of slapping 4. imitates the sound of the hitting of two flat objects 5. imitates the sound of falling into water	28 28 20 16 8
hapčí	imitates the sound of sneezing	1. imitates the sound of sneezing	100

chří	1. imitates the sound of snoring 2. imitates the sound of a device malfunction	1. imitates the sound of snoring	36
		2. imitates the sound of choking	28
		3. imitates the sound of an angry cat	12
		4. imitates the sound of screwdriver	12
		5. imitates the sound of a broken radio	4
grg	imitates the sound of burping	1. imitates the sound of burping	100
cveng	imitates sharp sound given by the crash of glass, metal	1. imitates the sound of a bell	48
		2. imitates the sound of the crashing metal objects	36
		3. imitates the sound of tapping glasses	12
		4. imitates the sound of crackling keys	4
buch	imitates the dark sound of shooting, explosion, etc.	1. imitates the sound of banging	52
		2. imitates the sound of falling	44
		3. imitates the sound of explosion	4
pí-pí	the sound of a small bird, the sound of peeping	1. imitates the sound of a small chicken	36
		2. imitates the sound of an electronic device (e.g. alarm-clock)	20
		3. imitates the sound of a small bird	16
		4. imitates the sound of a hen	16
		5. imitates the sound of calling hens	12
tresk	imitates the sound of collision, explosion, etc.	1. imitates the sound of banging, hitting	48
		2. imitates the sound of crash, collision	32
		3. imitates the sound of falling	12
		4. imitates the sound of explosion, roaring	8
šťuk	imitates the sound of sharp, hard impacts, e.g., sound given by pulling the trigger	1. imitates the sound of pressing a button	24
		2. imitates the sound of opening a door	20
		3. imitates the sound of turning the pen on and off	20
		4. imitates the sound of locking the telephone screen	12
		5. imitates the sound of clicking	12
		6. I do not know	12

## 4.2. The analysis of the answers in Questionnaire 2

As mentioned above, in the second part of the research, the respondents were asked to write down the sound they heard. The overall results of the questionnaire are provided in Table 2. It seems that the task to connect a particular sound with a particular onomatopoeic word was a bit more challenging for the respondents than the reverse one (see 4.1). Only one sound out of 20 – human body burping – was identified and captured by the correct onomatopoeia by all respondents. More than 90% of respondents were able to identify and to write down by a word the sound of dog’s barking, cock’s crowing and knocking of the door. Other respondents identified the sound (Table 2) but were not able to provide the onomatopoeia that is believed to mimic the given sound. In case of more than a half of sounds, the proportion of correct answers was between 50–80% and respondents often captured the sound by description or could not identify the sound at all. The highest dispersion in answers and the highest number of the non-identifications of a sound was in case of three sample sounds – falling of something into water, the sound of an eagle and the sound of coughing – despite the fact that the language provides the onomatopoeia for all those sounds. Questionnaire 2 has revealed one peculiarity: one of the sounds in the questionnaire was the sound of a bell. The Slovak lexicalized onomatopoeia for this sound is *bim-bam*, the English onomatopoeia for this sound is *ding-dong*. As specified above, the research was aimed at the analysis of the Slovak onomatopoeic expressions, all the respondents are native Slovak language speakers. Nevertheless, 64% of respondents connected the sound of a bell with the expression *ding-dong* (see Table 2). I asked one of the respondents (post-graduate student of translation and interpretation) why he inserted the English word in the questionnaire although the research was carried out in Slovak. The answer was clear: I played the sound and I knew immediately that this was a bell. But I could not recall the word we use for this sound. The only expression that was running through my head at that time was the English *ding-dong*, so I wrote it there.

**Table 2: The results of the Questionnaire 2**

The heard sound of	Lexicalized onomatopoeia for the sound	Respondent’s answer(s)	Number of answer(s) in percent
<b>dog’s barking</b>	hav, hav-hav	1. hav, hav 2. the sound was captured by description “the barking of a dog”	96 4
<b>cock’s crowing</b>	kikiriki	1. kikiriki 2. the sound was captured by description “the sound of a cock”	92 8



<b>a sparrow</b>	čvirik	1. čvirik 2. čim, čim 3. the sound was captured by description “the twittering of birds”	76 12 12
<b>snoring</b>	chíf	1. chř-fú, chró-pfjú 2. the sound was captured by description “snoring” 3. I do not know how to write it down	56 32 12
<b>crow’s croaking</b>	krá, krá-krá	1. kvak-kvak 2. the sound was captured by description “crow”	80 20
<b>falling of sth. in the water</b>	čľup	1. čľup 2. the sound was captured by description “the sound of shooting” 3. čľap 4. plesk 5. the sound was captured by description “the sound of splashing”	32 20 16 16 16
<b>gunshot</b>	1. bum 2. paf	1. bum 2. tresk 3. the sound was captured by description “explosion”	70 16 14
<b>laughing</b>	ha-ha	1. ha-ha 2. the sound was captured by description “laughing”	84 16
<b>an eagle</b>	iíi	1. iíi 2. aaá 3. pí-pí 4. the sound was captured by description “a bird’s sound” 5. the sound was captured by description “the sound of some animal”	32 32 16 12 12
<b>a bell</b>	bim-bam-cing	1. ding-dong 2. the sound was captured by description “bell” 3. tun-tun	64 20 16
<b>a turkey</b>	hudry	1. hudry 2. the sound was captured by description “the sound of a hen” 3. kotkodák 4. bác	64 20 8 8
<b>a horse’s neighing</b>	ihaha	1. ihihi, iíhaá 2. the sound was captured by description “a horse’s neighing”	80 20

<b>a cow's mooing</b>	mú	1. mú 2. the sound was captured by description "the sound of a cow"	96 4
<b>a pigeon</b>	hrkú	1. hrkú 2. the sound was captured by description "the sound of a pigeon"	72 7
<b>coughing</b>	kuc-kuc	1. ehm-ehm 2. the sound was captured by description "coughing" 3. kuc-kuc	40 32 28
<b>the heart-beat</b>	bum, buch	1. the sound was captured by description "heartbeat" 2. tik-tak 3. ťuk-klop 4. dum-dum	52 28 12 12
<b>the knocking on the door</b>	klop	1. klop 2. the sound was captured by description "knocking on the door"	92 8
<b>an owl</b>	hú, hú-hú	1. hu, hú 2. the sound was captured by description "an owl"	96 4
<b>thunder</b>	tresk	1. the sound was captured by description "storm" 2. drum 3. ššš	84 12 4
<b>burping</b>	grg	1. grg	100

## 5. Conclusions and implications for further research

In standard Slovak, onomatopoeia is a part of language system and the language provides its users with relatively high number of lexicalized onomatopoeia echoing various sounds of the extra-linguistic reality. Nonetheless, as the research probe into the position of onomatopoeia in the language of adults indicates, adult natives are not very familiar with onomatopoeic expressions. 30 respondents, native Slovak language speakers, were asked (1) to indicate the sound(s) imitated by 20 onomatopoeic expressions and (2) to capture 20 different sounds by an onomatopoeia. The aim of this research was to find out if (1) the meaning of onomatopoeia is well-known to the adult language users, (2) the native Slovak language users will capture one and the same sound by one and the same institutionalized onomatopoeic expression, and (3) the onomatopoeic words respondents used as the imitations of the sounds are identical with the lexicalized expressions. In both tasks, the respondents' answers were variable to a great extent. Consequently, the reply to none of the three research questions can be either yes or no. The research probe has shown that in most cases the onomatopoeic expressions were

connected with several diverse sounds by the individual respondents. In addition, one and the same sound (although easily identifiable) was captured differently by different respondents. These results correspond with similar results in other languages. For example, in Omani Arabic – the language rich in onomatopoeic expressions – “Different speakers may use different words to represent the same sound, which gives an insight that speakers, even of the same language or variety, may perceive the same sounds differently and thus may capture them otherwise” (Jahdhami 2020: 73). By implication, onomatopoeia, although “an integral part of the respective language system” (Körtvélyessy 2020: 542) thanks to its structure are on the periphery of adult vocabulary applied. Of course, to prove or disprove this claim, it is necessary to extend the number of respondents included in the research, to extend the sample of onomatopoeia under investigation and to carry out similar research on other typologically similar and typologically different languages. Only such broad and complex approach to onomatopoeia may shed light on the question of the existence and the use of onomatopoeic expressions in languages.

## Appendix

### Questionnaire 1:

Please, read the following words carefully and state what sound – in your opinion – the given word captures.

For example:

mňau ‘meow’<sup>4</sup> – imitates the sound / the voice of a cat

- |                 |           |
|-----------------|-----------|
| 1. kvík         | 11. fác   |
| 2. víř          | 12. plesk |
| 3. brum         | 13. hapčí |
| 4. já           | 14. chřf  |
| 5. hudry, hudry | 15. grg   |
| 6. čvirik       | 16. cveng |
| 7. hrkú         | 17. buch  |
| 8. cukru        | 18. pi-pí |
| 9. čimčara      | 19. tresk |
| 10. huhú        | 20. šťuk  |

**Questionnaire 2** (written version, the respondents were provided with the sounds only):

Listen carefully to the following sounds and try to catch them in words. If you can’t do this, please, try to describe what the sound reminds you of<sup>5</sup>:

<sup>4</sup> There are no English versions of the individual Slovak onomatopoeic expressions because not all of them have the English equivalent. The sound imitated by the individual onomatopoeia, that is, the meaning of onomatopoeia included in the research can be found in Table 1.

<sup>5</sup> The lexicalized onomatopoeia echoing the individual sounds can be found in Table 2.

For example:

the sound of meowing, answer: mau, mňau<sup>6</sup>

- |                                 |                                           |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| 1. dog's barking                | 11. the sound of turkey                   |
| 2. cock's crowing               | 12. horse's neighing                      |
| 3. the sound of sparrow         | 13. cow's mooing                          |
| 4. the sound of snoring         | 14. the sound of pigeon                   |
| 5. crow's croaking              | 15. the sound of coughing                 |
| 6. falling of sth. in the water | 16. the sound of the heartbeat            |
| 7. the sound of gunshot         | 17. the sound of the knocking on the door |
| 8. the sound of laughing        | 18. the sound of owl                      |
| 9. the sound of eagle           | 19. the sound of thunder                  |
| 10. the sound of a doorbell     | 20. the sound of burping                  |

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<sup>6</sup> See note 5.

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