

# **A Morpho-Semantic study of Phonesthemes in English and Arabic**

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## **Abstract**

This study is an attempt to investigate phonesthemes in English and Arabic. The study adopts the idea that there is significant similarity between English and Arabic in the area of phnesthemes. Examples of a number of sounds , simple and complex and their meanings, are provided in both languages to verify the hypotheses of the study. These examples show that a sound has a meaning and can affect the entire meaning of the word.

هذه الدراسة هي محاولة لاستقصاء معاني الأصوات في اللغة الانكليزية و العربية . تتبنى هذه الدراسة الفرضية القائلة بان هنالك تقارب واضح بين اللغتين في ظاهرة معاني الأصوات . و لإثبات صحة الفرضية ، تم ذكر أمثلة لعدد من الأصوات مع معانيها في كلا اللغتين و هذه الأمثلة تظهر بأن الأصوات لها معنى و يمكنها التأثير في المعنى العام للكلمة .

## **1. Introduction**

Scientific studies are now proving what poets and others have intuited since the dawn of language: in our minds, " sound and meaning are inextricably related ". The ancient Greek philosophers wrote sagely about this phonetic and semantic relationship, but, until recently, many of their intriguing observations have been ignored. Modern linguists call the relationship between sound and meaning " sound symbolism ", but most assume that it plays only a minor role in language. The general principle , they assume, is that sound and meaning relate only arbitrarily . According to this view, called ' symbolism ' , we say things the way we do merely out of custom, habit, or circumstance. The evidence accumulated from the past three decades challenges this assumption, and it is clear that sound symbolism plays a far larger role than hitherto recognized.

In this study, an attempt to investigate and analyze the phonesthemes in English and Arabic is carried out . The idea of this study stems from the fact that sounds , whether single or complex , have meaning , and both languages under study converge in reference to this phenomenon .

## **2. Phonesthemes in English**

The term ' phonestheme ' (in Britain, ' phonaestheme ' ) was coined by English linguist John Rupert Firth in his book *Speech* (1930) . They are defined in different ways , some can be defined as sounds or groups of sounds that occur in words with the same meaning . These sounds may be single sounds as / I / which gives the meaning of smallness as in " tiny " or / Λ / gives the meaning of unpleasant things as in " ugly , undesirable " or cluster , roughly speaking ' complex ' , of different sounds as / gl / which gives the sense of light, vision' as in : glimmer, glitter, glow, glint, etc.

Shisler ( 1997 : 16 ) states that Phonesthetic sound symbolism, also known as ' conventional sound symbolism ' or ' phonetic symbolism ' , is the use of sound symbolic elements called phonesthemes. A phonestheme is a sound, sound cluster, or sound type that is directly associated with a meaning. The initial cluster /gl/ (light, shining) is often cited as an example of an English phonestheme. It occurs, to a greater or lesser extent, in the following words: glass, gleam, glee (live coal), glisten, glow, glare, glint (glean, shine), glimmer, glimpse, glister, glitter, glim (shine, gleam), gloat, gloom, gloss, glaze (from gaze, glare, glance), glint (ablaut variant of glint), glower (blend of glow, glare, glance, lower), glum (look sullen) (probable ablaut variation of gloom), glade (a open passage through a wood; a grassy open or cleared space in a forest), moon glade (moonlight on water).

Phonesthemes can appear anywhere in a word in an initial, medial, or final position.( Waugh , 1994 : 89 ).

Knowledge of phonesthemes can help one understand how the mind grapples with new and old words, how (and why) similar words fit together, how there is an underlying order to our seemingly arbitrary lexicon, and how new words are born and how meanings evolve ( Ibid )

Many English sounds convey meaning by themselves another example is / sn / which gives the sense of 'nose, mouth' as in snore, snack, snout, snarl, snort, sniff, sneeze, etc. It is important to note that phonesthemes seem to outlast languages and, just as a starry sky is a window into our cosmological past, so phonesthemes are a window into our linguistic past. They are furthermore a glimpse into our linguistic future, English will not last forever, but it is highly likely that at least some of its phonesthemes will last until the end of human language itself.

Another view , adopted by Finegan ( 2008 : 95 ) , is directed to consider Phonestheme as a blending of phoneme and esthetic indicating the tendency of certain sounds to acquire esthetic or emotional connotations. According to the morphological view,

phonestheme is different from a morpheme because it does not meet the normal criterion of compositionality and this is what will be discussed later .

Finegan adds that Phonesthemes are of critical interest because of the internal structure of words where the internal structure of the word is non-compositional i.e., a word with a phonestheme in it has other material in it that is not itself a morpheme as shown in the examples above .

There are many obvious similarities between a phonestheme and a morpheme. As known that a morpheme, such as the prefix proto-, has both a characteristic sound and a meaning and this is one of the criteria of it. Phonestheme, such as the initial cluster of the sounds /gl/ also has a characteristic sound and a meaning. Indeed, some linguists consider phonesthemes to be nothing more than particular type of morpheme depending on the ability of getting meaning and characteristic sound (Bolinger1975:219) .

Confusing the issue is the word morpheme itself. A minimal sign is a linguistic sign that does not contain smaller elements. Properly, a morpheme is a set of minimal signs with identical content. For example, the /z/ of boys, the /Iz/ of stitches, and the /s/ of cats are minimal signs of the same morpheme. Unfortunately, a common definition of morpheme is "the smallest meaningful language unit" which seems to blur the distinction between morphemes and minimal signs. A phonestheme is a type of minimal sign: the same speaker always pronounces instances of the same phonestheme in the same way. For example, the English phonaestheme "gl-" occurs in a large number of words relating to light or vision, like "glitter","glisten", "glow", "gleam", "glare", "glint", and so on; yet, despite this, the remainder of each word is not itself a morpheme (i.e., a pairing of form and meaning); i.e., "-isten", "-ow", and "eam" do not make meaningful contributions to "glisten", "glow", and "gleam". Examples of phonesthemes in English (i.e., aside from "gl-"), include "sn-", related to the mouth or nose, as in "snarl", "snout", "snicker", "snack", and so on, and "sl-", which appears in words denoting frictionless motion, like "slide", "slick", "sled", and so on.

Although phonaesthemes are not integral to morphophonemic structure in the language, they contribute to the structure and meaning of vocabulary items in a similar manner to bound morphemes, and need to be given similar status (Spencer,1991:201). It is a sort of genetic fallacy to declare that "dusty, crusty, rusty, and musty ", or

again," flutter, mutter, stutter, sputter, and splutter ", are unrelated to each other ( Shisler , 1997 :17)

Morphemes are said to be segmentable unlike phonesthemes ; morphemes play a syntactic role in a word. Morphemes can change the part of speech of a word and, often, morphemes can be inserted only in certain locations within a word. Phonesthemes can appear anywhere in a word and they never play a syntactic role.

The semantic content of a morpheme, which is often directly present in dictionary denotations, is more potent than that of a phonestheme. For example, just about every proto- word has something to do with earliness but only a fraction of / gl / words have anything to do with light or shining.

Virtually all instances of the same morpheme derive from the same etymon..

## **2.1 Types and Sense**

This section is devoted to discuss the two types of phonesthemes . The phonesthemes may be single sounds , or roughly speaking " simple " or clustering , roughly speaking " complex "; of more than one sounds . Most of these sounds are gathered initially and convey different senses . Below is a concise description for the most popular ones .

In discussing each of the two types mentioned earlier , some examples of the sounds and their meanings are provided just to verify the first hypothesis of the study. Let's start with the simple phonemthemes.

### **2.1.1 Simple phonesthemes**

By simple phonesthemes , it is meant the single-sound phonesthemes . Henceforth , a partially-oriented survey is carried out to shed light on the sounds and their meanings . The aim of this item is to investigate the semantics of single sounds and their significance in the word. As it is mentioned earlier , one sound can affect the meaning of the whole word. Let's see in the following items .

1.The vowels /i:/ and /I/ suggest the meaning of smallness. The most important thing in this domain is that such sounds appear in many words that have smallness as a part of their meaning . This means that it is not obligatory that all words with such sounds must have the smallness sense (Stageberg1981;111-112). These phonesthemes are well exemplified in the following words:

Wee (adj.) means " very small " as in : a wee girl.

Peep (v.) denotes "to look quickly and secretly at something or somebody through a small opening" .

Squeak (v.) reveals " to make a short – high sound " .(Oxford Advanced Dictionary )

And there is a large number of words with such sound as bit , jiffy , seep , clink , tipple , clink , giggle , dwindle , drizzle , etc.

It is said that the sound is a phonestheme only when it is related to the meaning of the word which is a part . This means that the sounds /i:/ and /I/ are phnesthemes when their sense is related to the sense of the words , so this means that the words whose meaning does not include smallness , the /i:/ and /I/ are merely meaningless vowels. Thus the words " seat and sit " and many others with such sounds do not contain phonesthemes .

2. The voiceless stop consonants / p , t , k / at the end of one syllable words express an abrupt stoppage of movement . There is a large number of words with such sounds whose meaning conveys an abrupt stoppage of movement as " pat , slap , flick , tap , hit , crack , etc. " (Stageberg 1981: 112).

3. The sense of un abrupt stoppage movement can be suggested and well exemplified by the use of a final voiceless fricative /š / at the end of the monosyllabic words as in " mash , clash , bash , crash , smash , splash , etc.

4. In most cases especially at the end of the two- syllable words , the final sounds /-ər/ and /-el / give the meaning of repetition as " chatter , shimmer , clatter , gibber , patter , stammer , twitter , flutter , litter , shatter ,etc."( Ibid : 112) .

The syllabic sound /-el / is best shown in the following " babble. giggle, twinkle , freckle , juggle , drizzle , wriggle , stipple , etc.".

Again not all /-el /and /-er /are phonesthemes but this depends on the words that they are parts of as in " player " ; the sound here is not phonestheme .(Ibid)

5.Many words which mean 'to talk indistinctly' contain one or more occurrences of the labial consonant / m /, which is made with the lips firmly closed, preventing clear articulation. That way, the very act of pronouncing the word iconically mimics a key aspect of its meaning. You can see this if you watch yourself in a mirror saying words like "mumble, murmur, mutter, muted, grumble " etc. It is probably not an accident that these words also contain the phonestheme / Λ /." (Katamba, 2005 : 176 ) .

6. The initial cluster /p/ (explosive vocal sounds, energy, fighting, etc.) which is potent in words like " pipe, peep, puff, poof, purr, purl (gentle murmuring or bubbling sound like the water of a shallow stream flowing over stones), pop, pash (dash, smash), pat (dab), patter (the quick talk or

chatter of a comedian or entertainer, salesman, etc.; the slang or private language used by a particular group or class; to repeat mechanically without considering the meaning; to talk volubly but without much sense) from paternoster, pitter (make small sounds like a grasshopper), puke, etc.( Ibid )

7.The sound/ʌ/ in the majority of the monosyllabic words convey the (undesirable ) sense as in " muck , dud , grunt , gump" ( Stageberg1981:113).

There are other examples as klutz , grudge , glum , gunk ...etc. In words of more than one syllable , the sense of being (undesirable) seems to be present as in slovenly , grumpy , blunder , humdrum , muddle , puddle etc., (Katamba, 2005 : 176 ).

### **2.1.2 Complex Phonemes**

The majority of complex phonemes are bilateral and some are trilateral .

1.Most of words with the sound cluster/ cl-/ are often related to the hands or to holding as in " claim, clamber, cling , clip, club, etc.

2. The /fl-/ cluster in most of words convey the meaning of movement in air or water whether the movement of an object , human or even light as " flag , flagon , flap , flame , flight , flee, flue , flick , flutter , fluency , etc.

3. The sounds /gl-/ when they come in sequence initially , they convey the meaning of light and shading in behavior as in "glad , glamour, glance , glint , glitter , etc.

4. The initial combination of the sounds /s/ and /l/ gives the meaning of overwhelming pejorative connotation as shown in the following words "slang, slapdash , slash , slate , slave , sleaze.

5. This phoneme conveys the meaning of pejorative but not as bad as the cluster of / sl-/ sounds . The examples below show the following sense as in "snack , snag , Snail , Snub , snuff " .

6.The confined lack and lessen in movement and activity is well exemplified with the initial clustering of the sound /s/ and /t/ as in " stab , stop , stagger, stagnate , stake, statue , stiff, still ,etc.

7. The Cluster / sw-/ connotes various kinds of movement , often purposeful in nature as in "swaddle , swage , swarm , sway , swell, swig , Swing , etc.

8. Words are frequently associated with sounds caused by rapid movement in or through air as in "whack, whap, whip, whisk, whisper, whoop, etc.

9. The sounds /spr/ convey more than one meaning when they occur together in this arrangement. Each one expresses something that is related or not to the other one.

It is well shown in the following situations to convey the meaning of springing or spreading as in "spread, sprout, spray, sprinkle, spring, etc."

Here, the meaning of the sequence of /spr-/ is to express spiritedness and energy as in "spry, sprightly, springy, sprint, etc."

This cluster conveys two opposite senses, the meaning of narrowness and wideness as in "strait, strangle, strickle, straight, etc."

The other meaning that the sequence of these sounds is striding which refers to the long steps or implicitly conveys the meaning of the improvement or development of something to better or worse situations as in "straddle, straddle, stroll, struggle, etc."

The use of these sounds in some situations and words expose another meaning which is basically related to the movement and attack. Such usage to some extent is related to the previous one in reflecting the movement of something gently or nervously as in "stray, stride, strut, strafe, etc."

10. It is a coincidence that so many of words began with /l/ as in "licentious, lascivious, loose, lubricous, lecherous, libidinous, lustful, lickerish and lewd", is used to name a few. Somehow this luscious, liquidy /l/ sound seems well suited to convey the sense of wantonness. Words commonly group this way, sharing both meaning and a vague resemblance of sound. So the sounds we use to stand for things might start off being arbitrary, but over time the arbitrariness often falls away. (Burridge, 2004 : 213)

11. The cluster, wr, almost conveys bending or twisting movement, either physically or metaphorically as in "wreck, wreak, wrench, wrestle, wrist, wring, etc."

Phonemes can be of three-element cluster. Let's take the following example from *Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty*

"Humpty Dumpty is a word formation on the principle of rhyming reduplication with the root morpheme "hump", and "hump", like "lump", contains the English phoneme "–ump", whose meaning is 'something compact and heavy'. This semantic element is

appropriate to the interpretant of Humpty Dumpty, whose shape is 'exactly like an egg,' as Alice remarks." (Nöth, 1994 : 165).

12. It is suggested that the clustering of the sounds (-ump) , when they come finally in most of English words , gives the sense of heaviness and bluntness as in " bump , thump , stump , lump , dump , etc."

Now it is time to page through into the phenomenon in Arabic after having it investigated in English.

### **3. Phonesthemes in Arabic**

This section is carried out to focus the term in Arabic and , thus , to find out whether the two languages diverge or converge in the area of phonesthemes which , in turn , attain the second hypothesis of the study.

The beginning of the term " phonesthemes " can be traced to Al-Khalil and Sibawaih under the agreement of all Arab linguists. Al-Khalil ( as cited in Ibn-Jinni , 1913 : vol 2: 152) states that linguists were intrigued by the sound of the grasshopper when they said " صَرَ " ( to screech )

#### **3.1 The Semantics of single sounds**

In this section ,the meaning of single-handed sound will be focused. Sounds are treated separately to elicit their meaning before we move to study them in clusters. Adul-Qadir (1988:109) states that linguists frequently neglected the study of the meaning of single sound and ,on the contrary, paid more attention to onomatopoeic ones.

This section is based upon the fact that there is an agreement between the sound and its meaning , i.e., every sound is consistent with a state . Many linguists disagree to this idea ; it is claimed that sounds carry no meaning by themselves because meanings are not confined to one factor but they share many factors , most importantly is the context of situation . Let's take the two sounds (ض) and (م) which designate the meaning of (chewing). The meaning of chewing is attained in these two sounds since they denote the sound of the chewing process, but what is left is the kind of food to be chewed, i.e., (خَضَم) and (قَضَم).The verb(خَضَم) is used to chew wet food like melon and cucumber and alike, while (قَضَم) is used for dry or hard food (Ibn Jinni , 1913:157.vol. 2). Thus , as Ibn Jinni states , the denotative value of the sound is drawn from the properties of the sound itself , for instance,(ق) and (خ) are so close with reference to place of articulation and both of them are voiceless. Besides , the former is fortis while the latter is lenis. So, these two features determine the meaning of the sound , therefore , fortis sounds are used to denote hard things while lenis sounds can be used with soft things . To highlight this idea , let's take this example, the two verbs (سَدَّ) and (صَدَّ ) can denote differently . The former denotes ( to shut ) like:

He shut the door.

and can also be used with " seeing ". The latter ,i.e.,( صدّ ) (to prevent or force out) denotes an odd meaning in the above examples , the denotative sounds occur in the beginning of the words . Let's have some other examples in which denotative sounds occur in the middle. The two verbs ( قسم ) and ( قضم ) can be applied to denote different actions; the latter ( قضم ) ( to crush ) is more stronger than ( قسم ) (to portion out).

Likewise, the two words ( الوصيلىة ) and ( الوصيلىة ) are good examples of the middle sound occurrence .The word ( الوصيلىة ) (connector) means to connect between two parts, i.e., the idea of contact ,while the word ( الوصيلىة ) (means) can be used to mean an action that implies the idea of begging. Thus , semantically , (to connect) is more effective and stronger than (to beg).

Ibn Jinni inspired many Arab linguists who adopted the theory of " the expressive value of Arabic sounds ". In this respect , Al-Aqqad (1970:43) and Alayly (1962 : 156 ) agree with Anees ( 1980 : 134 ) in the area that Arabic sounds accord with their meanings.

Al-Aqqad( 1970: 143 )states that the semantic value can not be attained randomly with all sounds wherever they occur because these features can be attained when the expressive sounds occur in the beginning or at the end of the word only. For instance, let's take the sound( ح )which expresses the meaning of (ease and luxury) when it is uttered or heard. According to its occurrence in the word, onset or outset , the meaning can be designated, as in ( ارتياح ) (ease), ( سماح ) (bounty), ( فرح ) ( pleasure ) , ( مرح ) (fun) , ( صفح ) (forgiveness) , ( فتح ) (bless), etc. It can be easily seen that all these words denote " ease "

Depending on what has been stated by Al-Aqqad , Abdul-Qadir (1988:113) makes his conclusive statement saying that the sound in Arabic has no semantic value. He adds that the idea of ' three – sound-word which denotes a meaning resulted from some sort of coordinated arrangement of these sounds ' does not exist. To clarify his statement , let examine the following examples.

In the word ( حرق ) ( burnt ), he claims that ( ح )denotes ( السعة ) ( luxury ) , ( ر ) denotes ( التكرار ) (repetition and continuity of an action) while ( ق ) refers to ( الاصطدام ) (crush) and ( الشدة ) (power). The entire meaning resulted from combining the partial meaning of sounds is the concept of burning.

Consequently , a large number of Arabic sounds can be easily perceived to denote certain meanings. This can be noticed in the findings of Arab linguists studies of this field.

Now let's examine the meanings of some Arabic sounds :

1. ( ت ) refers to ( القطع ) (cutting) as in : ( بَتَّ ) ( to cut off ), ( بتر ) (to amputate) , ( ختم ) (to veil) , etc.
2. ( ث ) denotes ( الانتشار ) (spreading) and ( التفريق ) (parting) when it is the second sound in a word like ( بثَّ ) (to broadcast) , ( بثق ) (to spout), ( اثرى ) ( to enrich ), etc.
3. ( خ ) frequently reveals ( الضغط ) ( press ) and ( الهبوط ) (fall ) when it occurs at the beginning of the word , like: ( خرب ) (to destroy), ( خاب ) ( to fail ), ( خمد ) (to go out), etc.
4. ( د ) often refers to ( اللين ) ( softness ) and ( النعومة ) (delicacy) like: ( دبغ ) (to tan) , ( دمع ) (to tear) , etc.
5. ( ذ ) denotes ( القطع ) (cutting) when it occurs the second sound of a word , as in : ( ذبح ) ( to slaughter ), etc.
6. ( ر ) implies the meaning of ( التكرار ) (repetition and continuity ) of event wherever it occurs in a word , as in : ( مرَّ ) ( to pass ) , ( فرَّ ) ( to flee ) , ( قرع ) ( to knock ) , etc.

### 3.2 The Semantics of complex sounds

As the simple sound has a semantic value , the complex also has a semantic value. By complexity , it is meant that one sound accords another sound , and , in turn , being together , they form the meaning of the word .

Abdul-Qadir ( 1988 : 122) states that the sounds of the language are merely phonemes ( distinctive phonetic units ) and their effect in the meaning can be realized in the so-called " minimal pairs " wherein the sound meaning changes as a result of changing the sound positions. These distinctive phonetic units have some sort of significance that can be reflected on the meaning of the words when they take certain positions. This has resemblance with ' stress ' which affects the meaning of the speech due to the changing of the position of word syllables .

The first linguist who paid attention to this phenomenon is Ahmed bin Faris, ( as cited in Dhaif , ( 1997 : 211 ), when he said :

Almighty Allah puts His kindness and secrets in everything,  
and I deeply thought in this to find out that you see the  
sound ( د ) with ( ل ) with any third one to denote ' coming ,  
going and vanishing from one place to another ' .

Then , a number of linguist, ( as cited in Ibn-Jinni , 1913 : vol 2: 152), tried to investigate some sounds in different constructions and concluded that combining two certain sounds and any third one added to them reveal the same meaning even with changing the third sound by another one . Let's check some examples .

1. The combination of ( أ ) and ( ب ) and any third sound denote the idea of separation and alienation as in : اباح ( to disclose ), اباد ( to exterminate ), etc.
2. The sounds ( ج ) and ( ر ) and any third sound reveal pulling and traction as in : جرّ ( to pull ), جرى ( to flow ), جرف ( to drift ). etc.
3. The sounds ( خ ) and ( س ) and any third sound denote falling and descending like : خسى ( to be driven ), خسر ( to lose ), etc.
4. The sounds ( ر ) and ( خ ) with any third sound denote softness and easiness as in " رخ ( to dilute ), رخم ( to become soft ), etc.
5. The sounds ( س ) and ( ل ) and a third one refer to something departing from something else like " سلب ( to rip off ), سلا ( to forget ), etc.
6. The sound ( ش ) and ( ب ) and another sound denote to the idea of extension and prolongation as in the words like شبّ ( to become young ) , شبع ( to eat one's fill ) , etc.

On the other hand , Abdul-Qadir ( 1988 : 126) makes a mention for a criterion to distinguish between phonesthemes and those which are not when he states that some words are not original in the dictionaries because linguists identified a number of combinations , like those mentioned above , to be phonesthemes . They believe that these combination occur in Arabic and any other combinations are not Arabic or , let's say , they are morphemes because Arabic does not include such clusters like :

1. The sounds ( ج ) and ( ط ) which do not occur together unless the word is arabized or translated into Arabic .
2. The sounds ( ج ) and ( ق ) as in جردقة ( bread ) which is not Arabic .
3. The sounds ( س ) and ( ز ) as in سهريز ( kind of fruit ) , etc.

#### **4 . Discussion and Conclusions**

After reviewing the phenomenon in both languages , English and Arabic , it can stated that :

1. The sound has a meaning whether by itself or in combination with another sound . Phonesthemes in English language can occur in different positions and can be of one , two or three-sound and sometimes four-sound phonesthemes but in Arabic , it can be of either one or two-sound phonesthemes .
2. In both languages , the meaning of the sound can affect the entire meaning of the word , and this verifies the first hypothesis of the study .
3. Both languages show , to a large extent , significant similarity in that sounds have meanings and these meanings are peculiar . In another word , every sound has a meaning whether simple or in combination with other sounds . Phonesthemes can occur in

different position in the word in both languages , and this verifies the second hypothesis of the study.

4. In English , the sound has the same meaning even when the position of the sound is changed in the word while in Arabic , on the other hand , the meaning of the word is changed whenever the position of the sound is changed as the case with ' stress ' . Both languages converge in this area and this does not meet the second hypothesis.
5. In both languages , when the sound has no meaning , it is considered merely a phoneme .
6. Three-element phonesthemes do not exist in Arabic while in English, it is widespread. English four-sound phonesthemes are not, to an extent , common .

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