

Some Marginalia of Language Contact

Over the past three decades we have been witnessing a great impact of the English language on a number of other languages, and it is Professor R. Filipović's merit that the history, nature, and extent of this influence on Croatian has been studied in Zagreb.¹ As I also owe my interest in language contact to his instigation, I should like to devote the following observations on English exclamatory and sound imitative words in Croatian and Serbian to Professor Filipović upon his 60th birthday.

The expansion of mass media, particularly of cartoons and comics, has advanced a specific style which makes ample use of audio-visual effects, represented in print in addition to pictures, by various pictorial symbols (e. g. electric bulb for "idea"), and sounds symbolized by means of the alphabet. The sound imitation used in comics covers a wide range of human and non-human sounds and noises, some of which are part of the vocabulary while others are created for the nonce and can be regarded as innovations in the language.

Sound imitation is usually discussed under the name of onomatopoeia together with interjections, in studies of language origins. Some of the sounds have been supposed to be physiologically conditioned (Darwin in Jespersen, 1922—14), like cries of pain or joy and the like, or to have originated in imitation of animal sounds and other natural noises. Whatever the origin of exclamatory or imitative words, when they become effective means of communication they are used as symbols for various messages, representing even whole sentences (e. g. Oh! — "that took me by surprise", Wow! — "I've never seen such a nose!"), occurring also redundantly alongside sentences with the same meaning. Such symbolic elements enter the system of language

¹ The English Element in European Languages

and are classed as interjections and onomatopoeic words in grammatical descriptions.

In spite of the suitable technical terms and spelling that mark interjections and onomatopoeic words, they remain marginal elements in the system of language. They frequently violate the phonetic pattern (Bloomfield, 1933/147), they do not form "favourite sentence types" (ibid. 176—177), and their meaning is connotative (156—157). No matter whether these inferior communicative elements are conditioned by the human anatomy or are resembling natural noises, it can be noticed even by an unsophisticated speaker that they vary from language to language. To the frequently quoted examples of differences in ejaculations expressing pain between various languages we may add the difference between English *oh!* or *ow!* and the Croatian or Serbian (further SC) *joj!* or *jao!*, likewise between the barking of a dog *bow-wow* in English (further E) and *vau vau* or *av av* in SC. It follows then, as language study has shown, that supposedly natural sounds (as well as movements) are bound to particular languages and societies.

Studies in linguistic contact seldom deal with interjections and onomatopoeia (Filipović 1967 and 1971). Owing to their nature they would belong to the sphere of intimate borrowing (Bloomfield 1933 /461—475), i. e. to close contact between two speaking communities where influence is transmitted through speech. And indeed, there have been borrowings with these characteristics into dialects from German e. g. *vau vau* or *fuj!*, an exclamation of disgust, from Turkish *aman!*, denoting grief, or from Italian *ma ke!* expressing disagreement, disbelief etc.

The rise of mass media has brought about a modification in the manner of linguistic borrowing, characterized by rapid and wide expansion. The influence transmitted through written texts of typically spoken elements is certainly a new mode of cultural borrowing. The written texts owing to which this type of borrowing has been facilitated are in the first place comics, a special type of cultural feature, with its own style and reading public.

Readers of comics are predominantly young people, roughly between 6 and 20 years of age. The younger of this age group do not have their speaking styles completely formed and are extremely susceptible to innovation, specially if emotionally charged yet structurally simple elements are being acquired.

The locus of contact however, is the translator, whose task differs somewhat from that of the translator of literary or scientific, and similar, texts. The translator of comics (as well as of cartoons, films, etc), is confronted with a text consisting mainly of dialogues composed in a manner aiming at maximal colloquialism, with the situation not being set so much by ver-

bal description as by pictures and pictorial symbols. The time at his disposal for the completion of his work is rather limited, which must prevent him from consulting dictionaries or informants and from reflecting over the most appropriate translation equivalent. So it happens that more often than not interjections and sound imitative words remain untranslated, and as such are taken in by the young reader, who repeats these sounds first in imitation of this heroes from the comics or cartoons, next in jocular stile, and finally in stylistically unmarked speech.

The present paper is based on material from comics about various Walt Disney's characters, and a comic series with themes from the American West.²

The exclamatory and imitative words (used in comics) fall into three major groups: sounds produced by people, animal sounds, and sounds produced by objects, including the noise a human or animal body makes when hitting against an object or part of body (fist, foot). These words occur in the translation, merely transcribed, or even in the original from.

1. Human sounds can be further divided into a) voluntary interjections, often standing for whole sentences, like greetings, calls, sounds used to communicate with animals, etc., b) involuntary sounds accompanying certain emotional states, e.g. excitement, amazement, pleasure, though it would be more appropriate to speak of grades of spontaneity, since certain of these sounds (e. g. war cries) are certainly highly conventional and often uttered at command; c) nonsymbolic sounds and noises, produced involuntarily and concomitant of certain states and movements.

Examples:

a)	translated	hej!	(attracting attention) E hallo (it could also be a transcription of <i>heigh</i>)
		đihaaa!	(urging a horse) E <i>gitty-up</i>
		šic!	(scaring away a cat) E <i>ssss</i>
	transcribed	uuuuuhuaahuu!	(Indians calling)
	original	psst!	(demanding silence, seeking attention of some one)
		tralala	(singing without words)
b)	original	transcribed	translated
	hm	uf! uf	jao!, joj!
	(thinking)	(Indians surprised)	(pain)

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ha ha ha	uh!	E ah!, oh!, ow!
he he he	(disgust, disappointment)	pih!
hi hi hi	E ugh!	(disgust)
(laughter)	jahaa!, jihii!, juhija!	E ugh!
ah! oh!	etc.	ooo ... pa!
(pain)	(Indian war cries)	(when jumping)
oho!	jipii!	E whoops!
(suprise)	(delight)	
aha!	E yippee!	
(triumph)		
tst! tst!		
(disapproval)		

A special case is the interjection *oh ne!* or *ne!* a calque of the English *oh no!* or *no!* uttered in disappointment or unpleasant surprise, where in Croatian and Serbian the most likely outcry would be the already much used cry of pain *jao!*.

c) original	transcribed	translated
zzz	njam!	mljac!
(snoring)	(eating)	(eating)
gluglug		
(drinking)		
aaahhh!		
(yawning)		
puuuf!		
(breathing forcibly)		
gulp!		
(catching breath when hit on head, swallowing)		

Needless to say, most of the interjections have a whole range of connotations of which only some are mentioned above. Also, it will be easily noticed that many of them are common to both languages, and moreover, they are widespread, perhaps even universal, in human speech (e. g. hm, oho, aha, traalala) so their transfer from language to language can occur without any change, except for the adaptations to the recipients' orthographic system. So in SC all *y*'s and *w*'s are transcribed with *j* and *v* respectively, *gh* is simplified into *h*, *u* stands for *oo* /*u:*/, and *a* for *u* /*^*/. There are also many cases where the original orthography is left unchanged, which results in a spelling pronunciation by a SC speaker, e. g. *glug-glug* is pronounced with an /*u*/ sound. On the other hand some original spellings, like *tst tst* will result in much the same sound though the affricate /*ts/* is in SC normally spelt *c*.

2. Animal sounds are, as mentioned, conventional and differ from language to language, and even in one language there

is sometimes more than one word used in imitation of one animal's sounds. The translator's practice is to translate the more common animal sounds only.

The following examples are in their original E forms

grrr (growling of cat, lion, puma and dog)

arrff (fox)

ronronron (purring of cat, lion etc.)

szz, vrrr, grrr (mosquito flying)

The purring sound is a definite innovation in SC, where it should resemble the onomatopoeic verb for pur *presti*.

Transcriptions:

skik (mosquito)	from squeak
kvik (goose)	" queak
hu hu (owl)	" hoo hoo
muuumm (cow)	" moomm
arrrggg (gorilla)	" arrggh

Proper translation equivalents are also found, and that for the quaking of a duck: *kvak* (possibly a transcription for *quack* as well), and the barking of a dog: *vau vau* or *av av*, of which the first is also a loan word from German.

3. Noises of inanimate origin form the most numerous group of imitative words, which can be classified according to the material that body producing the noise is made of (wood, glass, iron, stone etc.), and the nature of the noise, i. e. whether it is instantaneous, repeated, prolonged. We shall consider here only the most frequently imported forms.

A common sound is the one made by a gun or rifle, which is either transferred in the original form *bang* or transcribed as *beng*, both forms outnumbering the SC symbols *bum* and *dum*. Other sound combinations ending in -ng or -nk are used for various purposes: for imitating a ringing sound, for instance *ding*, *dling*, *dringh* (for the sound produced when glass is broken); *bradabang*, for a body rolling down a staircase; *tonk* for the noise produced by tin; *tvang* (with the transcription of v for w) an umbrella opening; and *sbonk* when a ball hits against a head. The SC imitative words would lack the velar component of the nasal, as the phone [ŋ] does not occur in word final position in SC (except in loan words).

A symbolic word with a similar phonological structure but standing for a visual effect is *blink* for the stars one seems to see when hit on the head. In E this obviously derives from the verb *blink* that refers to this visual effect produced by the stars

in the evening sky. In SC the verb is *blistati* or *svjetlucati*, so that the E word would not evoke the intended association were it not for the accompanying picture of the comic strip, which then further enables the borrowing of this word. Another visual effect expressed in E with the word *flash* could in SC be symbolized by the word *bljes* (from the verb *bljesnuti*, a form marked for the perfective aspect), but is more frequently represented by the E original form or its transcription, i. e. *fleš*.

The E *broom* for thunder also transcribed as *bruum*, is used though some combination of g and r would be expected in SC, deriving from the already onomatopoeic noun *grom* (thunder) and the corresponding verb *grmjati*. Similarly *slam* for a lid being slammed, instead of *klop* from *klopnuti* (also *poklopac* = lid).

Sounds typically produced by round objects /ball, head/ falling or hitting against something in E *glob*, *plop*, *sbam*, *sbonk* (the last symbolizing, by the combination -nk, a hollow object), are mostly left untranslated, probably to a great extent due to the difficulty of finding better imitative words than the much exploited *bum*, *dum* and *tres*.

Several other words are seldom translated, thus *splat* (fish hitting an object) instead of *pljes* or *plis*, *strap* (rope tearing) instead of *krc* or some other such word, granting the fact that it is not very appropriate as an imitation, as it mainly symbolizes wood cracking. This sound, however, is also represented with the E form *crash* (or transcribed as *kraš*). Likewise a key turning in the lock is often accompanied by the original E word *click*, transcribed as *klik*, though the SC imitative word *škljoc* is also found. The imitative word *klik* is in CS traditionally connected with the sound produced by an eagle, and also stands for an outcry of joy.

The sound of drums is found in the forms *tum tum* or *tam tam*, for the SC *dum dum*, *bum bum* or *tup tup*.

When we speak of more appropriate imitative forms in a language, we usually understand either an already existing imitative word, or a form that can be derived from a verb or noun of the same or similar phonological structure. It is important that the imitative form is recognized by most speakers of a language and interpreted as having the intended connotation. The acceptability of a phonological structure, or even of spelling, is also to be understood in correlation to the overall phonological structure of a language and the current orthographic rules. If we consider the nature of exclamatory and imitative symbols, i. e. their frequently deviant phonological structure (e. g. *psst*, *grrr*), inflexible phonology, and isolation from major syntactic patterns, it is obvious that it is unimportant that they be completely integrated into the receiving

language, just as they do not necessarily conform to the characteristics of the system of the lending language.

A further factor will support the introduction of structurally non-typical elements into the borrowing language: the main transmitters of such words, children of an age group when new phonological habits are still easily acquired, as studies of foreign language learning have shown. (M. Vilke, 1974/8).

The motivating force is the wish to communicate on an equal level with playmates, which means imitating the same kind of linguistic habits. To this fact could be added the emotional connotation and expressiveness of the new words, particularly acceptable to a young speaker. These two components are probably the main reasons for a rapid and widespread use of such symbols as *oh no!*, *bang bang*, *glug — glug*, and *yippee*, and of an increased use of various more or less traditional onomatopoeias in general.

Due to their marginal structure and affective features, exclamatory and imitative symbols qualify for universal acceptance and for the role of modifiers of existing systems into which they are borrowed. They are moreover, easily adaptable and suitable for integration as elements of the recipient system.

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