The Study of Onomatopoeia in the Muslims' Holy Write: Qur'an

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Abstract

Onomatopoeia, the imitative making of words from natural sounds, is a common phenomenon found in all languages of the world. The study of onomatopoeias is, however, inadequate considering its importance in the development of language. The present study provides a descriptive account of onomatopoeias in Muslim's sacrosanct book, Qur'an. Qur'an is important for Muslims, because as per Islam it is the holy book of Islam religion and Allah's words revealed to prophet Muhammad (PBUH) through the Angel Gabriel (Jibril). It has 114 surah and 77701 words. The results show that there are just 9 onomatopoeic words in Qur'an.

We can argue that this is because of the diversity of the tribes in the time of Islam's advent and the dialectical differences between them. And also translating onomatopoeia is hard work. Usually omission or extra explanation happens in translating them. Therefore, Allah used a few onomatopoeias in His words.

Key terms: onomatopoeia, Qur'an, Arabic, Muslims

Introduction

In the realm of linguistic study, it is commonly accepted that the sound for the word of a particular meaning is arbitrary; therefore, there is generally no connection between sound and meaning. This, however, is not absolutely correct, as we have neglected the existence of a class of words, namely onomatopoeias, which do appear in the everyday use of language quite often. These are sound symbolism - that is, words whose pronunciations suggest the meaning, like *meow* for cat's voice (Fromkin & Rodman & Hyams, 2003: 7 & 589).

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As its Greek root suggests, *onomatopoeia* is the making (*poiein*) of a name or word (*onoma*) from natural sound. Onomatopoeias are thus imitative words of these natural sounds. They are found in all languages of the world, and some linguists, in fact, believe they were the first words human spoke when language was developed. Since direct imitation allows the hearer to understand the meaning most easily, it is the most obvious way to describe actions (e.g. *punch*, *boom*) and animals (e.g. *cock*, *dodo*), which constitute the most parts of the conversation between primordial human. Therefore, the hypothesis is, indeed, reasonable. These primitive sounds have evolved over time and the remnants have become today's onomatopoeias.

Linguistic Study of Onomatopoeia

Despite the importance of onomatopoeias in the world's languages, the linguistic study of them is pitifully inadequate. Many linguistics regarded onomatopoeias as "second class citizens among words, since they are often polysemous, while at the same time, paradoxically, applicable to only a narrow semantic range" (Falk, 1973: 60). Of course, onomatopoeia is a modified type of coining in which a word is formed as an imitation of some natural sound. As on borrowing and the various means of making new words based on old ones, onomatopoeia involves a model that serves as the basic for the new word, but onomatopoeic model is extralinguistic - it lies outside of language itself. Words like buzz, as well as those that represent animal noises, like moo, were originally attempts to imitate natural sounds (ibid).

Onomatopoeia is a general expression used in ordinary spoken and written language. Some kinds of onomatopoeic words imitate sounds, such as the sound of a clock: "Tick-tock". Others mimic states or emotions, such as "Zig-zag".

The use of onomatopoeia varies with language and written works. For example, some Asian languages, especially Japanese and Korean, have many onomatopoeia words and also onomatopoeic words represent states, movements, feelings and emotions, and allow their expression in a fun, lively manner. But we might be rather skeptical about a view that seems to assume that a language is only a set of words which are used as names for entities (Yule, 1996: 3).

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Onomatopoeia is a figure of speech and is especially useful for rhetorical effect. A good example of the onomatopoeic words is in the comic books which the lettering of these onomatopoeic words enhance the beauty of comic books effectively.

The Focus of This Paper

In order to provide a clearer picture on onomatopoeia, it is the object of this study to find out the characteristics of onomatopoeias of the Qur'an, Muslims' holy book.

Review of the Literature

Anderson (1998) listed four objections to onomatopoeia on linguistic grounds proposed by some linguists. The objections are as follows:

1. Onomatopoeias are conventional signs, not imitative echoes;

2. Even if onomatopoeias are imitative, they are not non-arbitrary;

3. Onomatopoeias exist on the margin of language, not as part of *langue*;

4. Onomatopoeias do not accurately imitative natural sounds.

In response to these objections, Anderson pointed out that the capacity of human to mimic sounds is limited by the constraints of phonological systems and the structure of the human vocal tract. Therefore, an exact imitation of natural sounds by human is not possible, and hence objection 4 is true but nevertheless cannot be used to prove that onomatopoeias are merely conventional. Moreover, since onomatopoeias are constrained by the phonological systems of different languages, they can only be partial imitation of natural sounds. However, it does not naturally follow that onomatopoeias are conventional and arbitrary. As a matter of fact, onomatopoeia is a kind of iconicity, and it only requires a partial resemblance of the referent (Anderson, 1998: 129).

Müller (1891) regarded onomatopoeias as merely "playthings", and not as a part of the language system. He argued that they are rootless, which means they have no etymology, and unproductive, which means they cannot generate new words. This, however, is in contrary to the fact.

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Vahidian (1996) wrote a dictionary of onomatopoeia in Persian. After some definitions he lists all the Persian onomatopoeias. Even he distinguishes between emotional and non-emotional onomatopoeias. His book is the best source about this subject for Persian language people (Vahidian, 1996).

Nowrouzi (1994) believes that naming onomatopoeia is because of their melodic similarities (Nowrouzi, 1994: 93).

Saghravanian (1990) says that there is a natural relationship between pronunciation of some words and what they refer to (Saghravanian, 1990: 151).

Shervanloo (1975) points that, natural things are better than artificial ones, because they are more familiar to human beings. There is no distance between what is said and its meaning in natural sounds. For example, there is an indirect relation between the word laugh and its meaning, but the word guffaw is the act and voice of laughing (Shervanloo, 1975: 338).

Barahani (1979) studied the importance of onomatopoeia in poems. Although he believes that onomatopoeia is the basic source of every language, he concludes that the poets don't use this phenomenon as it should be (Barahani, 1979: 43).

In Thomas and Hill's (2012) view point, onomatopoeia is one of literary special effect that makes long car trips, train trips, and airplane trips much more enjoyable! They studied some special onomatopoeia and at the end of their article they presented some literary examples with onomatopoeia such as *the pied piper* of Hamelin and *the bells* of Edgar Allen Poe (Thomas and Hill, 2012).

Sangoi (2012), states that there are lots of different examples of onomatopoeias in the newspapers' comic section, old comic books, children story book and also in fairy tales. It can be well concluded from his article that how the phonemes from our surrounding context can be good examples of the onomatopoeic words which can be used in comic books and also how the

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lettering of these onomatopoeic words enhance the beauty of comic books (Guajarati) effectively (Sangoi, 2012).

Hiroko (2006) identified the methods used in translating Japanese onomatopoeic and mimetic words in literature into Spanish and English. Almost 300 cases are extracted and nine methods such as onomatopoeia in the target language are identified. Each method is analyzed with some examples, considering its effectiveness in transmitting the meaning of the original expressions (Hiroko, 2006).

Need for the Study of Onomatopoeia Used in Holy Qur'an

There are also other works on onomatopoeia that we ignore them for shortage of space. But what is clear is that there isn't any study about Qur'an's onomatopoeia, even though according to Muslims the Qur'an is a complete record of the exact words revealed by Allah through the Angel Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad (Sal-Allaho-Alay-hay-Wasal-lam, PBUH) and it's the principal source of every Muslim's faith and practice. As Qur'an is so important for Muslims, it seems necessary to study it from all angles. One way is to study onomatopoeia in Qur'an, the aim of the present research.

Organization of Qur'an

Qur'an is organized with respect to the location of revelation of verses, whether in Makkah or Madinah. Qur'an has words, Ayahs (verses), Surahs (chapters) and Juz. The Qur'an was equally divided into thirty parts, perhaps based on the number of pages, disregarding content or Surah. This was done for the convenience of reciting the whole Qur'an in thirty days or one month. Each Juz is also divided into four quarters or four "ruba". The Qur'an copies printed anywhere in the world have 30 Juzes and quarter markings as ruba' (first quarter), nusf (one-half) and al-thulatha (three-quarter). This gives 120 quarter-parts of the Qur'an giving the flexibility of reciting the whole Qur'an in equal parts in 30, 60 or 120 days.

The Qur'an is the Book of Allah. According to Muslims, every word in it has come from Allah. That is why Muslims say that it is a Holy Book. The words in the Qur'an were sent by Allah to Prophet Muhammad. The Prophet received the words of Allah through angel Gabriel.

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Prophet Muhammad (s) was an Arab and the majority of people in Mecca and Medina spoke Arabic. Therefore the Qur'an was sent in spoken Arabic. According to Muslims, the difference between the Qur'an and past revealed books is that the Qur'an is the only Divine Book that has remained unaltered. Muslims believe that the Qur'an we have with us contains exactly the same message that was sent to Prophet Muhammad by Allah through Gabriel.

Methodology

Onomatopoeias are not merely "playthings" which children learn in kindergarten, even adults do use a lot of them, with or without noticing it. As a matter of fact, languages rely a great deal on onomatopoeias to describe actions. When onomatopoeias are used, there are four main functions, to enrich the contents of texts, by giving more vivid description of the environment; to increase the degree of musicality, since as it was said, onomatopoeias are words that imitate natural sounds; to deepen the impression of readers towards the message and also to maximize the reality of the situation so that the readers can get a real acoustic sensation of the whole picture. These are the functions of onomatopoeia, and we can divide them into four groups, namely:

1. Calls of animals,
2. Sounds of nature,
3. Sounds made by human,
4. Miscellaneous sounds.

As it was said, Qur'an has 30 parts in about 600 pages. Researchers read it to find its onomatopoeias. The next step is categorizing the detected onomatopoeias into the aforementioned 4 groups.

Discussion

The researchers read the Holy Book, word by word. But the numbers of the detected onomatopoeias were a few. Qur'an has 77701 words, and 114 surahs. The number of the verses of each surah is different. For example, the second surah of the Holy book, *Baqara* has 286 verses but the last surah of Qur'an, *Naas*, has just 6 verses. According to this research, there are just 9 onomatopoetic words among 77701 words of Qur'an. You can see the results of the

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research in the following table with the number of the surahs and the number of the verse of those surahs which the onomatopoetic word is detected in:

	Meaning of the Onomatopoetic word	Number of the surah	Number of the verse	Name of the surah	Place of the revelation
1	Mooing of the cow	7	148	Baqara	Makkah
2	Mooing of the cow	20	88	Taha	Makkah
3	Whisper	20	108	Taha	Makkah
4	Hoopoe	27	20	Naml	Makkah
5	Thunder	13	13	Raad	Madinah
6	Thunder	2	19	Baqara	Madinah
7	Groan	11	106	Hud	Makkah
8	Groan	21	100	Anbiya	Makkah
9	Groan	25	12	Bible	Makkah

Table 1, Onomatopoeias of Qur'an

As you see the number of the detected onomatopoetic words of Qur'an are about one nine-thousandths of the whole words of it, and it is a little strange. When Islam rose, there were 360 tribes in Arabia. Although the language of Quraish tribe was the basic language between these tribes, they had lots of phonetic differences with each other because of social, political, geographical, and racial factors. So it seems that the low number of onomatopoeia in Qur'an is because of this difference. It is possible for the actual usage of the onomatopoeic words to vary across tribes. So, the Qur'an does not use them more than this.

Among the detected onomatopoeias, numbers 1, 2, and 4 are calls of animals. Numbers 5, and 6 are sounds of natural, and numbers 3, 7, 8, and 9 are sounds made by humans. As you see, it is possible to classify onomatopoeias into some special groups, such as what is determined in the methodology section.

Conclusion

In summary, we see that onomatopoeias are distinct classes of words. They are found in every language due to their imitative nature. Despite a common origin, onomatopoeias for the same sound in different language are influenced or restricted by the different phonological systems, leading to discrepancies between them. In addition, onomatopoeias are as productive as

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any other words. They can develop into nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs, which become part of our everyday vocabulary.

Omission could be seen as an appropriate method of translation, especially in cases of onomatopoeic words, which often do not have equivalent "sounds" in the target language. When there is no equivalent word in the target language, the translators should consider using other resources, such as explicative paraphrases or combination of various words. And it may change the meaning.

It can be well concluded from above that in an international text such as Qur'an the number of onomatopoeia should be as least as possible. This is what we can see in Qur'an, just 9 onomatopoeic words among 77701 words of it!

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