The Phonaestheme in German from a diachronic perspective.
A corpus-based analysis

Robin Beck
(Humboldt University of Berlin)

Phonaesthesia – the phenomenon of the systematic association of consonantal sound clusters with connotative meanings – has fortunately enjoyed at least continuous attention from linguistic research for several decades. But although a historical study of this phenomenon seems highly promising, it must be noted that before and after the lexicon-based analysis for four English phonaesthemes by Zingler (2017), there have been no broader diachronic analyses of the phonaestheme to date. For German, on the other hand, there exist only a few works even on the phenomenon as such (Rott 2015; Mucha 2015; Elsen 2016, 2017; Lötscher 2020; Pozza & Civale 2022).

Thus, the underlying work intends to provide an impetus in precisely these two directions, in order to gain a deeper insight into this category from the perspective of the history of German language, by providing answers to the questions: how the productivity of the category develops over the history of the language, how stable the phonaesthemes and the corresponding phonaesthemic lexemes prove to be in terms of meaning and phonetic form, and to what extent the development of individual phonaesthemes differs from one another. Proof of high stability should provide evidence for the categorial status of the phonaestheme in the German language (cf. Zingler 2017).

To this end, initially all potential phonaesthetic candidates were determined on the basis of Old High German and a selection of ten statistically remarkable candidates was made (*bl-, dr-, gl-, kl-, kr-, pr-, s(ch)m-, s(ch)n-, s(ch)w-, zw-/dw-/tw-*). Their connotative meaning was determined with recourse to the pioneering *Grammatica linguæ Anglicanæ* by the English mathematician John Wallis (1653), whose classification proved to be accurate for German in many cases. In order to be able to analyze the actual use of language, the development of these phonaesthemic candidates was now traced across the entire history of the German language by means of a comprehensive corpus analysis (ReA, ReM, DTA, AdG), determining the type and token frequency of the phonaesthemic lexemes and carrying out a qualitative analysis of selected individual cases, not without at least throwing a few spotlights on the question of the positioning of phonaesthemes in the field of tension between morphology and phonology.

The study provides evidence for the categorial status of the phonaestheme in German as well as for the dominance of the category in a historical dimension: Overall, the results show, at fluctuating token frequencies, a clear superiority of phonaesthemic lexemes over non-phonaesthemic lexemes in view of a high constancy of type frequency in the range of just under 60 to 100 % since Old High German times, which on the one hand speaks in favour of the continuing productivity of the category in German, and on the other hand, since changes in the token frequency of phonaesthemes are reflected less strongly than might be expected in the type frequency, for a high internal stability of the phonaestheme groups themselves. The category's stability up to the early history of German encourages a further exploration of the origins of the phenomenon on a historical-comparative level.

References

[AdG =] *Archiv der Gegenwart (1931–2000).* (n. d.) Digitales Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache. https://www.dwds.de/d/korpora/adg (23.12.2023).

[DTA =] *Deutsches Textarchiv Kernkorpus + Erweiterungen (1465–1969).* (n. d.) Digitales Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache. https://www.dwds.de/d/korpora/dta.

[ReA =] Zeige, Lars Erik / Schnelle, Gohar / Klotz, Martin / Donhauser, Karin / Gippert, Jost and Lühr, Rosemarie (2022): *Deutsch Diachron Digital. Referenzkorpus Altdeutsch.* Deutsch Diachron Digital: https://www.deutschdiachrondigital.de/rea/.

[ReM =] Klein, Thomas / Wegera, Klaus-Peter / Dipper, Stefanie and Wich-Reif, Claudia (2016): *Referenzkorpus Mittelhochdeutsch (1050–1350). Version 1.0.* https://www.linguistics.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/rem/.

Elsen, Hilke (2016): *Einführung in die Lautsymbolik.* Berlin: Erich Schmidt.

Elsen, Hilke (2017): Ist das Phonästhem eine morphologische oder eine lautsymbolische Erscheinung? *Zeitschrift für Wortbildung 1*(2), 9–29.

Lötscher, Andreas (2020): Die Affrikate *tsch* in den Varianten des Deutschen: Wortstruktur und Wortschatzstruktur. *Zeitschrift für Dialektologie und Linguistik 87*(1), 66–100.

Mucha, Claudia (2015): *Theorie und Empirie des Phonästhems* [Doctoral dissertation, Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich]. Elektronische Schriften der LMU München. https://edoc.ub.uni-muenchen.de/18253/1/Mucha_Claudia.pdf.

Pozza, Marianna and Civale, Sara (2022): Between Synchrony and Diachrony: The Multimodal Nature of Phonaesthemes. *International Journal of Linguistics 14*(1), 180–202.

Rott, Julian A. (2015): Phonästheme. Eine randständige Kategorie. *Sprachwissenschaft 40*(1), 45–71.

Wallis, John (1653): *Grammatica Linguæ Anglicanæ. Cui præfigitur De Loquela, (*Sive *De Sonorum omnium Loquelarium Formatione,) Tractatus Grammatico-physicus.* (n. p.)

Zingler, Tim (2017): Evidence against the morpheme: The history of English phonaesthemes. *Language Sciences 62*, 76–90.