

Title: Emergent Meanings-Functions of Czech Onomatopoeia
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The present paper focuses on the interaction between meanings-functions and vowel height in Czech onomatopoeic expressions (OpEs) (i.e., indeclinable sound-motion imitative expressions). It shows how metaphor, by profiling only selected aspects of the basic sound properties at a time, motivates multiple meanings-functions, and it explains how non-sound-symbolic meanings-functions – even, apparently, those that seem contradictory to one another – are related to basic physical (acoustic and articulatory) properties. For example, the “I-sounds” ([i] and [i:]) in monosyllabic OpEs are directly associated with three basic physical properties: [HIGH FREQUENCY], [SMALL RESONATOR] and [CONSTRAINED RESONATOR]. Each of these motivates meanings/functions in its own way, so that the resultant meanings-functions may appear contradictory to one another, e.g., [HIGH VALUE] and [LITTLE SIGNIFICANCE]. Furthermore, the emergent meanings-functions bring about reinterpretation of originally basic physical properties as instantiations of the more general non-sound symbolic schemas [SMALL] and [HIGH]. The connection between plurality (expressed in some OpEs ending in *-ky*, *-y*, *-ity*) and the I-sounds can also be mediated by metaphor.

To the extent that the model illustrates how meanings-functions arise as limited aspects (out of a set of properties) which are repeated and extended further, it is consistent with the notion of “emergent grammar” (Hopper 1987) and the view of language change as akin to a termite nest (Bybee 2001). The data from Czech onomatopoeia further suggest that metaphor can help explain the apparently arbitrary relationship between sound and meaning.

The paper draws on qualitative and quantitative data from the Czech National Corpus SYN2005 and manually collected examples.

Hopper, P. 1987. “Emergent Grammar.” Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society 13, 139–157.
Bybee, J. 2001. Phonology and Language Use. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP.

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