Running head: ONOMATOPOEIA 1

The Tunes of Our Language: Arabic Onomatopoeia

Dina M. Al-Sibai

KSU – College of Languages & Translation

June 24th, 2013

ONOMATOPOEIA 2

The Tunes of Our Language: Arabic Onomatopoeia

The term “onomatopoeia” was coined by J. R. Firth in 1930 to define a phoneme or a group of phonemes that had “recognizable semantic associations due to recurrent appearance in words of similar meaning” (n.p.), such as “slime”, “slob”, “slop” that seem to imply some kind of negative dampness (Chalker & Weiner, 1994). Others such as Azzam (2006) have defined onomatopoetic expressions as those whose sounds mimic “a sound occurring in the real world” such as “miaow”, “hiccup” and “burp” (122). In the Arabic language, there also exists a rich stock of such melodic words such as"مواء" و "زقزقة" (“Nyaa or miao”, 2013). In fact, a deeper look into Arabic onomatopoeia has revealed some interesting issues surrounding their usage.

For those in the field of translation, translating onomatopoetic expressions from English into Arabic and vice versa seems to pose some difficulties. Muhaidat, for example, explains that a sentence in literature such as “The exquisite gentleman of the finest breeding wore little pendent trinkets that chinked as the languidly moved” (54) would not give the same effect in Arabic if we literally translate the onomatopoetic expression “chinked” into "توسوس", that implies a “whisper”, and therefore suggests “خشخشت” as a better rendering of the meaning (2009). Muhaidat stresses through numerous exemplifications the great care that needs to be taken to avoid literal onomatopoeic translations in order to capture the real essence of the sound.

The same concerns are also brought up in Shunnaq & Al-Thebyan’s (2003) article. They believe that if there’s no onomatopoeic expression in the target language, there may be some loss in meaning, but according to them, this can be rectified by taking the “phonic and graphic effects into account” (130). The authors discuss another problematic matter with onomatopoeia in ONOMATOPOEIA 3 general and that is the different distinctions linguists have come up with. For example, where some have distinguished “primary and “secondary” onomatopoeia, the authors distinguish them as (a) “onomatopoeia” that resemble their referents such as “hum”, and “buzz” and (b) “sound symbolism” that have meaningful phonetic sequences like “gleam”, “glow” and glimmer” (130).

Dickinson, Hervey & Higgins (2002) explain that in the Arabic language, a further distinction is made as there are one syllable onomatopoeic expressions such as “طق” and “دق” and two reduplicative ones like “دندن” and “همهم”. The authors illustrate how this can complicate matters when it comes to translating from Arabic into English. A case in point is a story by Yousef Idrees entitled “لغة الأي أي”. They explain how ridiculous it would be to have an English title such as “The Language of Ouch” and in this case, it’d just be better to not use onomatopoeia altogether in the target language and just translate it simply to “The Language of Pain” (85).

Though Arabic onomatopoeic expressions may cause some frustrations in translating them, we can’t deny the melodic beauty they add in many types of texts. Some have drawn comparisons between the flowing sounds of the Quran when recited and music, as if it’s a drum beating in sync with the beating of one’s heart. Onomatopoeia in the verses in the Quran seems to increase the effect of its message. To illustrate, in “فإذا جاءت الصاخة” we find that the word for 'deafening noise', 'alssakhkhatu,' chosen here makes a harsh sound referring to its meaning, which in turn, definitely makes a larger impact on the reader, and this ultimately is the goal (Tzortzis).

As long as we stick to the phonological rules of Arabic onomatopoeic formation (Ibrahim, 2010), no doubt we will be seeing more and more of these interesting new expressions ONOMATOPOEIA 4 enter our language and be gradually accepted by the new generation. Examples of newer formations are “طووط” for censorship, “وي وي” for an ambulance/emergency, and “طع” for small explosions like those of fireworks. Indeed, as Muhaidat (2009) concludes, onomatopoeic expressions certainly do enrich a text in “encompassing a combination of sound and movement … [that] reinforces the imagination and captivates … [the] readers” (19).

ONOMATOPOEIA 5

References

Azzam, B. (2008). *Certain terms relating to islamic observances*. (p. 122). Boca Raton, Florida: Universal Publishers. Retrieved from http://books.google.com.sa/books?id=lceq d9FKhsAC&pg =PA122&dq="arabic onomatopoeia"&hl=en&sa=X&ei=hz\_ EUbXMEYWjtAaV0oHAAw&ved=0CCoQ6AewAg

Chalker, S., & Weiner, E. (1994). *The oxford dictionary of english grammar*. Oxford University Press. Retrieved from http://books.google.com.sa/books?id=q7On4H66eeYC&pg=PT518 &dq=onomatopoeia coined by&hl=en&sa=X&ei=0jPEUc\_\_KcvEsgbA24DYDw&ved= 0CCkQ6AEwAg

Dickinson, J., Hervey, S., & Higgins, I. (2002). *Thinking arabic translation: A course in translation method*. (p. 85). London: Routledge. Retrieved from http://books.google. com.sa/books?id=o-U8ETL53PcC&pg=PA85&dq="arabic onomatopoeia"&hl=en&sa= X&ei=PzfEUY\_YE8PCtQaIhIG4Aw&ved=0CCEQ6AEwAA

Ibrahim, A. (2010). Noun Formation in Standard English and Modern Standard Arabic: A Contrastive Study. *Journal Of Language Teaching & Research*, *1*(5), 614-623. doi:10.4304/jltr.1.5.614-623

Muhaidat, F. (2009). *A tale of two cities in arabic translation*. (pp. 52-54). Boca Raton, Florida: Universal Publishers. Retrieved from http://books.google.com.sa/books?id= xXuMEY5WU0AC&pg=PA19&dq="arabic onomatopoeia"&hl=en&sa=X&ei= jj7EUf6YC8vOswb-lIGICQ&ved=0CCYQ6AEwAQ

ONOMATOPOEIA 6

*Nyaa or miao? animal sounds across languages*. (2013, 3 8). Retrieved from http://www. livinglanguage.com/blog/2013/03/08/nyaa-or-miao-animal-sounds-across-languages/

Shunnaq, Abdullah and Qusai Al-Thebyan.“The Translation of Onomatopoeia in Edwar Al-Kharrat’s Turabuha Za’faran into English.” *INTERFACE: Journal of Applied Linguistics*. 17.2. 2003. 127-143.

Tzortzis, H. (n.d.). *Introduction to the literary and linguistic excellence of the quran*. Retrieved from http://www.theinimitablequran.com/IntroLinguisticLiteraryExcellenceQuran.html