

Onomatopoeic Words in Slovak: Everyday Use and Stylistic Function

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Summary. Onomatopoeias — words that echo sounds from the extra-linguistic reality — are usually understood as units representing a direct relationship between form and meaning. Lexical onomatopoeias are part of a language system, and their meaning can be found in dictionaries. It is assumed that onomatopoeias are crucial in communication by and to infants and are also considered important stylistic devices in poetry. However, they seem to be only marginal in adults' speech. This paper presents the results of an analysis of the understanding of Slovak onomatopoeias in everyday communication as well as of the stylistic dimension of these expressions in poetry. First, attention was paid to the comprehension of sound-imitating words in context by the sample of 30 native Slovak language speakers. Then, a sample of ten Slovak poems, well-known due to their usage of various sound-symbolic elements (onomatopoeias included) as stylistic devices, was examined to verify the supposed stylistic dimension of onomatopoeias in poetry. The results indicate that the understanding of the real meaning of lexical onomatopoeias depends on the specifics of the context and that onomatopoeias play a less important role in poetry than expected.

Keywords: standard Slovak, onomatopoeia, stylistic device, context usage, conventionality.

Onomatopoje v slovenčine: každodenné používanie a štylistická funkcia

Abstrakt. Onomatopoje — slová, ktoré imitujú zvuky z mimojazykovej skutočnosti — sú chápané ako jednotky reprezentujúce priamy vzťah medzi formou a obsahom. Lexikálne onomatopoje sú súčasťou jazyka ako systému a ich významy možno nájsť v slovníkoch. Predpokladá sa, že onomatopoje sú dôležité v komunikácii s dieťaťom, ako aj v reči dieťaťa, a sú vnímané aj ako významný štylistický prostriedok v poézii. Avšak, zdá sa, že v reči dospelých majú iba okrajové postavenie. Tento príspevok predstavuje výsledky výskumu zameraného na porozumenie slovenských onomatopojí v každodennej komunikácii, ako aj na štylistický rozmer týchto slov v poézii. Najprv sme pozornosť zamerali na analýzu významu zvuk imitujúcich slov v kontexte na vzorke 30 rodených hovoriacich. Následne sme skúmali vzorku desiatich slovenských básní, ktoré sú známe využívaním rôznych zvukovo-symbolických prvkov (vrátane onomatopojí) ako štylistických prostriedkov, aby sme overil predpokladané štylistické uplatnenie onomatopojí v poézii. Výsledky naznačujú, že pochopenie skutočného významu

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lexikálnych onomatopojí závisí od špecifikácie kontextu a že onomatopoeje zohrávajú v poézii menej dôležitú úlohu, ako sa očakávalo.

KLúčové slová v slovenčine: spisovná slovenčina, onomatopoeja, štylistický prostriedok, kontextové použitie, ustálenosť.

Onomatopėjiniai žodžiai slovakų kalboje: kasdienis vartojimas ir stilistinė funkcija

Santrauka. Straipsnis skiriamas slovakų kalbos onomatopėjai kaip leksikos daliai. Onomatopėjiniai žodžiai yra garsažodinės kilmės, jais mėgdžiojami įvairūs nekalbinės tikrovės garsai. Šie žodžiai paprastai suprantami kaip vienetai, reprezentuojantys tiesioginį formos ir reikšmės ryšį. Straipsnyje daroma prielaida, kad onomatopėjiniai žodžiai yra svarbūs bendraujant su kūdikiais, suaugusiųjų kalboje jie užima nežymią vietą. Onomatopėja taip pat yra populiarī poezijos stilistinė priemonė. Straipsnyje nagrinėjamos šios dvi onomatopėjinių žodžių vartosenos, pateikiama onomatopėjinių žodžių pavyzdžių kasdienėje komunikacijoje analizė ir tokių žodžių poezijoje stilistinės dimensijos tyrimo rezultatai. 30 žmonių, kuriems slovakų kalba yra gimtoji, atkreipė dėmesį į garsą imituojančių žodžių supratimą kontekste. Be to, tariamai onomatopėjos stilistinei dimensijai poezijoje patikrinti buvo iširta dešimties slovakų receptija gerai žinomų eilėraščių, kuriuose vartojami įvairūs garsiniai ir simboliniai elementai (įskaitant onomatopėjinius) kaip stilistinė priemonė. Tyrimo rezultatai rodo, kad onomatopėjinių žodžių reikšmių supratimas priklauso nuo konteksto ir kad onomatopėjos vaidmuo poezijoje yra mažesnis nei tikėtasi.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: standartinė slovakų kalba, onomatopėja, stilistinė priemonė, vartojimas kontekste, sutartingumas.

Introduction

Following the concept of structuralism as introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure [Saussure 2011], the position of onomatopoeias in a language is quite clear. Onomatopoeia as a sound-imitating word is characterized by ‘the motivated connection between form and meaning’ [Körtvélyessy 2020, 512], thus falling into the sphere of an iconic-symbolic semiotic principle, while the rest of the lexicon is determined by non-motivation representing an arbitrary semiotic principle [Sabol & Zimmermann 2014, 145–146]. Despite this generally accepted delimitation of onomatopoeias, theoretical accounts of these items vary across languages. Nevertheless, there are several basic aspects of onomatopoeias that most linguists agree on:

- (1) The degree of identity (similarity) of an onomatopoeic expression with a sound from the extra-linguistic reality it is said to imitate depends on the phonemic structure of a given language, on the anatomic predispositions of human speech organs to imitate sounds, and on the predisposition of the human organ of hearing to perceive sounds. Consequently, onomatopoeias have to be determined by convention [Bredin 1996, 559].
- (2) There are two basic categories of onomatopoeias: lexical and non-lexical. Lexical onomatopoeias are part of a language system; they are

conventionalized (institutionalized), and their meaning (the sound it echoes) can be found in a dictionary. Non-lexical onomatopoeias are also known as onomatopoeic neologisms. They are created ad hoc by a language user when there is a necessity to imitate a sound [Simpson 2004].

- (3) The morphological classification of onomatopoeias is diverse. They can be treated as interjections [in Czech; see, e.g., Lotko 2000], nouns [in the Arabic languages; see, e.g., Jahdhami 2020], adverbs (in Japanese), etc.
- (4) In the process of communication, onomatopoeias are considered important to infants' speech but appear to be only peripheral in adults' everyday communication [see, e.g., Laing 2014]. Most linguists assume that onomatopoeias are essential as stylistic figures in poetry [e.g., Simpson 2004, 67].

The position of onomatopoeias in standard Slovak

With regard to onomatopoeias in standard Slovak, there are a number of lexical sound-imitating words whose meanings are defined in dictionaries. However, the theoretical information about these expressions is very limited, as is the research to (dis)prove this theoretical knowledge about onomatopoeias.

The Slovak linguistic tradition sees onomatopoeias as a special category of interjections known as the so-called 'amorphous word class' that has neither declension nor conjugation [Ondruš & Sabol 1987, 169–174]¹. Körtvélyessy provided the first complex account of the sound structure of onomatopoeias, and her research has shown that there is no difference between onomatopoeias and the rest of the vocabulary as to consonant combinations and the frequency of occurrence of individual phonemes [Körtvélyessy 2020, 538, 528].

The function of onomatopoeias seems to be similar to the function of sound-echoing words in other languages, as specified above. The communicative value of onomatopoeias in infant speech (that is, speech by and to infants) has been investigated by Ondráčková (2008) and Kičura-Sokolová (2017), who came to the conclusion that onomatopoeias are crucial in the process of language acquisition due to their simple sound structure requiring lower articulatory abilities and their imitating character. Nonetheless, in Slovak, there has been no systematic research on the position of onomatopoeias in adult speech/language. Some sources indicate that they can be used as stylistic instruments in poetry [e.g., Ondruš & Sabol 1987, 160; Sabol & Zimmermann

¹ In standard Slovak, interjections fall into two categories: a) interjections proper, which can be emotional (*ach* 'oh', *fuj* 'phooey') or volitive (*lala* 'behold', *aha* 'aha') and b) sound-imitating expressions (onomatopoeias), for example, *bác* 'bang', *kikiriki* 'cock-a-doodle-doo', etc. [Ondruš & Sabol 1987, 174].

2014, 148], but there is no research to support these theoretical ideas about onomatopoeias as sound-symbolic components of a verse.

Hence I decided to analyse the topic in detail. First, I concentrated on understanding sound-imitating words in isolation. Using a sample of 30 native Slovak language speakers, the research probe suggested that although Slovak offers its users lexical onomatopoeias whose meanings are defined in dictionaries, adult natives are not very familiar with onomatopoeic expressions. It also showed that in most cases, onomatopoeias were connected with several diverse sounds by the individual respondents. In addition, one and the same sound (although easily identifiable) was captured differently by different respondents [Gregová 2021, 17].

Current research: inspiration and aims

Keeping in mind the well-known fact that context plays an important role in the understanding of words [see, e.g., Porto 2007; Gennari et al. 2007], in the next step of my research, the results of which are presented in this paper, the comprehension of onomatopoeias in context is tested. Finally, to gain a more complex view of the cognition of onomatopoeias in the Slovak language, focus is placed on the verification of the supposed stylistic dimension of these units in poetry. The outcomes of the research will help clarify the position of onomatopoeias in the everyday speech of Slovak language speakers, the sound-symbolic nature of onomatopoeias in Slovak, as well as the application of onomatopoeias as sound-stylistic elements.

Onomatopoeias in context

A questionnaire was prepared to evaluate the comprehension of onomatopoeias in context by native Slovak language speakers. It had 20 onomatopoeic words covering three basic categories of sounds from the extra-linguistic reality:

- (1) animals and birds: *kvík, vrř, brum, íá, hudry, čvirik, hrkú, cukrú, čimčará, huhú*;
- (2) human beings: *fác, plesk, hapčí, chrř, grg*;
- (3) instruments: *cveng, buch, pípi, tresk, štuk²*.

For consistency with the first part of the research — the identification of onomatopoeias in isolation [Gregová 2021] — an identical set of onomatopoeic words was used in the evaluation of their meaning in context. The research was carried out on a sample of 30 native Slovak language speakers. These were male and female university students aged between 21 and 30.

² There are no English versions of most of the Slovak onomatopoeias. The dictionary meaning(s) of these lexical onomatopoeic words can be found in Table 1.

The respondents were asked to identify the sound captured by the onomatopoeic words occurring in a sentence, that is, in context (see Table 1). They were provided with two sentences for each onomatopoeia: a more general one (low-disambiguating context) and a more specific one with a clear reference to the source of the sound captured by the onomatopoeia (high-disambiguating context)³. The sentences were scattered so that two sentences with the same onomatopoeia did not occur immediately after one other.

The results of the research probe reveal that despite the placement of onomatopoeias in context, the respondents were not able to identify their meanings (that is, the sound it imitates) as expected. Onomatopoeias imitating the sounds of humans (*hapčí, grg, chrř*) were easily identified in any type of context, as were some of the animal sounds (*kvík, brum*). These words are quite frequent in everyday communication, according to the Slovak national corpus (korpus.sk). As for the rest of the onomatopoeic expressions, the successful identification of the ‘correct’ meaning (that is, a meaning identical to the one found in dictionaries) depends on the specification of the context, even in cases of onomatopoeias with one clear dictionary meaning. For example, *hudry* (or *hudry-hudry*) is an onomatopoeia echoing the sound of a turkey. This is the only meaning dictionaries offer. The respondents were given two sentences:

- (1) *To zviera, prapodivno záhadné, to keď spustí hudry-hudry a začne Vás naháňať....*

‘That animal, strangely mysterious, when you hear hudry-hudry and it starts chasing you...’

- (2) *Hudry-hudry, zahundral moriak.*

‘Hudry-hudry, the turkey hooted.’

All 30 respondents only identified that *hudry* is the sound of a turkey when it was explicitly specified in context, that is, when it occurred in a high-disambiguating context (sentence 2); otherwise, they gave various answers as to the source of the sound captured by this word. The data thus proves the importance of context in the process of the identification of onomatopoeias.

³ A low-disambiguating context does not contain all the relevant information necessary for the correct identification of the meaning of onomatopoeias. A sentence with a clear reference to the source of the sound is a high-disambiguating context (also known as a strongly disambiguating context) since it includes all the information essential for the proper specification of the meaning of sound-imitating words. The distinction between these two basic types of context has a psycholinguistic motivation. In psycholinguistics, the meaning of words, ‘even the meaning of a seemingly unambiguous word such as piano’ [Tabossi 1988, cited in Gennari et al. 2007, 1278], depends on the context in which they occur. The higher the ambiguity of a word, the more information relevant for the understanding of its meaning is necessary. Consequently, lexical ambiguity is studied by placing one and the same word in contexts that differ in the amount of disambiguating information they offer [for details, see, e.g., Gennari et al. 2007].

Table 1. *Understanding onomatopoeias in context*

Onomato- poeia	Dictionary meaning(s)	Example sentences (1 = more general, 2 = more specific)	Number of correct answers (in percent)
kvík	imitates the sound of a pig	1. 'Mali by sme tu upratať'. 'Kvík, kvík'. 'We should clean up here'. 'Kvík, kvík'. 2. 'Kvík, kvík', zakvičalo prasiatko. 'Kvík, kvík', the piglet squealed.	100 100
vřř	imitates the sound of some animals, devices, etc.	1. Začul som známe vřř a už bol pri nás. I heard the familiar vřř, and he was with us. 2. Začul som známe vřř jeho motorky. I heard the familiar vřř of his motorcycle.	45 100
brum	1. imitates the sound of some musical instruments 2. imitates the sound of the grumbling of a bear	1. <i>Brum-brum-brum</i> , jar sa hlási! Brum-brum-brum, the spring is here. 2. V brlohu sa prebudil medveď: <i>brum-brum</i> . A bear woke up in the den: brum-brum.	100 100
já	imitates the sound of a donkey	1. Zvieratá hrôza chytá, 'já, já', čo ten chce? The animals are terrified, 'já, já', what does he want? 2. 'Já, já' pýta sa somár, čo len chce? 'Já, já', the donkey asks, what does he want?	71 92
hudry, hudry	imitates the sound of a turkey	1. To zviera, prapodivno záhadné, to keď spustí <i>hudry-hudry</i> a začne Vás naháňať... That animal, strangely mysterious, when you hear hudry-hudry and it starts chasing you... 2. <i>Hudry-hudry</i> , zahundral moriak. Hudry-hudry, the turkey hooted.	25 100
čvirik	imitates the twittering of some birds, especially of a sparrow	1. Počujem <i>čvirik-čvirik</i> . Čo to je? I heard <i>čvirik-čvirik</i> , what is it? 2. Čvirik. čvirik, poskakoval malý vrabček. Čvirik-čvirik, the small bird bounced.	38 100
hrkú	imitates the sound of a pigeon	1. 'Hrkú-hrkú', ozývalo sa z balkóna. Hrkú-hrkú came from the balcony. 2. 'Hrkú-hrkú', pospevoval holub na balkóne. Hrkú-hrkú, the pigeon sang on the balcony.	23 100

Onomatopoeia	Dictionary meaning(s)	Example sentences (1 = more general, 2 = more specific)	Number of correct answers (in percent)
cukrú	imitates the sound of a turtle dove	1. ‘Cukrú-cukrú’, ozvalo sa mu nad hlavou. Cukrú-cukrú, he heard above his head. 2. Hrdlička si veselo cukruje: ‘cukrú-cukrú’. The turtle dove sings happily: cukrú-cukrú.	32 95
čimčara	imitates twittering of a sparrow	1. V hniezde bolo počuť tichučké čimčara. A quiet čimčara was heard in the nest. 2. ‘Čimčara, čimčara’, vyspevovali vrabce pod oblokom. ‘Čimčara, čimčara’, the sparrows sang under the window.	74 100
huhú	imitates the sound of an owl	1. V lese sme počuli divné huhú. We heard a strange huhú in the woods. 2. Na prechádzke sme začuli sovu: huhú. We heard an owl on the walk: huhú.	25 100
fác	expresses a fast or unexpected blow to the face/head, slapping	1. ... a fáč, už mu dal jednu na zadok. ... and fáč, he smacked him. 2. Fáč, ozvalo sa po každom údere. Fáč sounded after each blow.	31 54
plesk	1. imitates the sound of slapping on the head 2. imitates a sharp impact, a hit	1. Plesk, zaznelo v hore. Plesk sounded in the mountains. 2. Plesk, dal mu facku. Plesk, he slapped him.	27 84
hapčí	imitates the sound of sneezing	1. Hapčí! To sa ohlásili dôsledky nočného kúpeľa. Hapčí. Hapčí! The consequences of a night bath were announced. Hapčí. 2. ‘Hapčí’, kýchol Jano. Hapčí, Jano sneezed.	100 100
chír	1. imitates the sound of snoring 2. imitates the sound of a device malfunction	1. Rádio urobilo chír a správy sa prerušili. The radio went chír, and the news was cut off. 2. Otcovo hlasné chír sa ozývalo celým domom. Father’s loud chír was heard in the whole house.	100 100
grg	imitates the sound of burping	1. ‘Grg’, pardon, zahundral Peter. ‘Grg’, pardon me, Peter muttered. 2. Grg a dieťatku sa uľavilo. Grg, and the baby was relieved.	100 100

Onomatopoeia	Dictionary meaning(s)	Example sentences (1 = more general, 2 = more specific)	Number of correct answers (in percent)
cveng	imitates the sharp sound made by the crash of glass, metal	1. <i>Začul iba tiché cveng.</i> He heard a quiet cveng. 2. <i>Cveng, cinkli poháre.</i> Cveng, the glasses clinked.	42 100
buch	imitates the dark sound of shooting, an explosion, etc.	1. <i>Buch a už ho nebolo.</i> Buch, and he disappeared. 2. <i>'Buch, buch', otvor tie dvere.</i> Buch, buch, open the door.	72 100
pí-pí	the sound of a small bird, the sound of peeping	1. <i>Na záhrade začul divné pi-pí.</i> He heard a strange pi-pí in the garden. 2. <i>Pí-pí, píпали kurence.</i> Pí-pí, the chickens peeped.	84 100
tresk	imitates the sound of a collision, explosion, etc.	1. <i>Začul silné 'tresk' a už ich nebolo.</i> He heard strong tresk, and they disappeared. 2. <i>Začul silné 'tresk', to vybuchol granát.</i> He heard a strong tresk, a grenade exploded.	25 100
šťuk	imitates the sound made by pulling the trigger of a gun	1. <i>Trikrát 'šťuk' a zvieria padlo na zem.</i> Šťuk three times, and the animal fell to the ground. 2. <i>Zbraň trikrát vystrelila: šťuk, šťuk, šťuk...</i> The gun fired three times: šťuk, šťuk, šťuk...	17 100

Onomatopoeias as a stylistic device in poetry

The evaluation of the alleged stylistic dimension of onomatopoeias in poetry was based on the analysis of ten Slovak poems⁴:

- (1) Janko Král': *Jarná pieseň* 'Spring Song'
- (2) Ivan Krasko: *Otrok* 'The Slave'
- (3) Martin Rázus: *Vlakom do Štrby* 'By Train to Štrba'
- (4) Martin Rázus: *Vlakom zo Štrby* 'By Train from Štrba'
- (5) Ladislav Novomeský: *Slnce na vodách* 'Sun on the Waters'
- (6) Ladislav Novomeský: *Slovo* 'The Word'
- (7) Ladislav Novomeský: *Do mesta 20 minút* '20 Minutes to the Town'
- (8) Ladislav Novomeský: *Španielska obloha* 'The Sky of Spain'
- (9) Štefan Moravčík: *Zakliati smiechom* 'Cursed by Laughter'
- (10) Peter Repka: *Priateľka púšť* 'Girlfriend Desert'

⁴ The results of this research should be considered indicative only.

The selection of poems was motivated by their description in handbooks on literary theory and anthologies of literature aimed at the interpretation of artistic texts as poems characterized by the usage of onomatopoeias as sound-picturesque components [see, e.g., Andričík 2021, 14]. Surprisingly, the frequency of occurrence of onomatopoeias in all poems is very low: below 1% of the total word count (for a complete list of these words, see Table 2). Moreover, morphologically speaking, the number of pure onomatopoeias, that is, onomatopoeias as a sub-category of interjections (see note 2), is even lower, since some of the expressions are interjections (for example, *hľa*, *juj*) or derivatives of onomatopoeias (for example, *zakukala*, *svičí*) rather than onomatopoeias as sound-imitating elements.

As for the phonic structure of the excerpted onomatopoeias, it is evident that none of the onomatopoeic words found in the analyzed poems is exceptional in terms of its segmental structure, which is usually CVC (the simple syllabic structure), and there is no special clustering of sounds.

Table 2. *Classification of expressions from the poem sample with an onomatopoeic nature*

Expression	Morphological classification (word class)	Dictionary meaning(s)
hľa	interjection proper	expresses a warning, pointing to someone/something
hej	interjection proper	expresses a warning
ej	interjection proper	expresses different feelings (satisfaction, admiration, rejection, regret, warning, etc.)
zakukala	3rd person singular past tense of the verb <i>zakukat'</i> 'to cuckoo', derived from the onomatopoeia <i>kuku</i> 'cuckoo'	/
zakukaj	imperative of the verb <i>zakukat'</i> 'to cuckoo', derived from the onomatopoeia <i>kuku</i> 'cuckoo'	/
ach	interjection proper	expresses different feelings, e.g., pain, grief, desire, surprise
hujaja	interjection proper	expresses merriment, joy (usually in folk songs)
hujahoj	interjection proper	expresses merriment, joy (usually in folk songs)
cveng	onomatopoeia	imitates the sound of glass
haha	onomatopoeia	imitates the sound of laughter
hihi	onomatopoeia	imitates the sound of laughter
huhu	onomatopoeia	imitates the sound of an owl
ratata	onomatopoeia	imitates the sound of shooting

Expression	Morphological classification (word class)	Dictionary meaning(s)
tik-tak	onomatopoeia	imitates the sound of a clock
pišťanie	noun motivated by the verb <i>pišťať</i> 'to squeak'	/
švist	noun, švist 'whizzing'	/
svičí	3rd person singular future tense of the verb svišťať 'to whistle'	/

In summary, the research probe aimed at the study of onomatopoeias as a stylistic device in poetry has shown that

- (1) Onomatopoeias as a word class are mixed up with interjections proper and verbs in fiction and poetry (that is, in literary theory), although linguistics make a clear difference between these categories. In linguistics, onomatopoeias are a sub-category of interjections, not vice versa, as it seems to be understood in literary theory.
- (2) The number of real onomatopoeias is very low, and it turns that the alleged sound-symbolic application of onomatopoeias in poetry is a linguistic myth. Of course, onomatopoeias may help create the overall sound-symbolic nature of a poem, but only in cooperation with other sound-symbolic elements [Sabol & Zimmermann 2014]. However, this is a topic for different, more literary-oriented research.

Conclusions

Although theoretical information about onomatopoeias in standard Slovak is relatively limited, onomatopoeias are part of the language system, and in dictionaries of standard Slovak, there is a relatively high number of lexical onomatopoeias that are said to mimic various sounds of the extra-linguistic reality. However, this research, which aimed at understanding the meaning of onomatopoeias in different contexts, has demonstrated that the specification of the source of the sound in the context itself plays an important role even in the case of onomatopoeias with a clear dictionary meaning (Table 1). Furthermore, an analysis of the stylistic usage of onomatopoeias in poetry indicated that the frequency of occurrence of onomatopoeic expressions in poems is, contrary to initial expectations, limited. These findings prove that onomatopoeias are conventional, and language users therefore have to acquire them like the rest of the lexicon. Indeed, 'onomatopoeia — by its function and by its form — represents the most archaic part of the vocabulary of human speech, relicts of the history, now only marginal in communication' [Pauliny 1981, 23].

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