(RESEARCH ARTICLE)

Imagery Echoes: An analysis of onomatopoeia in Bengali and Japanese visual narratives

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Abstract

An increasing curiosity in communication through visual narratives has been observed in recent years in multidisciplinary research. This paper seeks to explore the role of onomatopoeia or ideophones in visual narratives, focusing on the Bengali comics, 'Hada Bhoda' and the Japanese manga, 'Doraemon'. Onomatopoeic words can serve both as a linguistic and visual tool to enhance visual storytelling by representing different actions, emotions and atmospheres. By using a qualitative content analysis method, this study analyses how sound-symbolic expressions are integrated into picture stories to reflect cultural nuances. The study also examines the performative functions through the multisensory functions of ideophones. This cross-linguistic analysis offers significant implications for communication, media and education.

Keywords: Onomatopoeia; Ideophones; Visual narratives; Comics; Manga

1. Introduction

Onomatopoeic words or ideophones help to bring visual narratives to life. These words phonetically replicate or mimic natural sounds in human communication. According to Bredin (1996), the most straightforward type of onomatopoeia which he calls a direct onomatopoeia, happens when two conditions are met. First, the word refers to a type of sound, and second, the sound of that word is similar to the sound it describes. In other words, the word sounds like the noise it represents. For instance, direct onomatopoeia includes words like, 'hiss', 'moan', 'cluck', 'whirr' and 'buzz'. However, it is evident that these words do not perfectly match the sounds they describe. This notion becomes even more apparent with other examples such as, 'splash', 'rustle', 'zoom', 'bang', 'shriek' and 'thud'. Even though these words are similar to the sounds they represent, the resemblance is not always exact. Words like, 'hiss' come closer to imitating the sound but such high levels of resemblance are relatively rare. Ideophones in visual narratives refer to the words mimicking natural sounds to boost and amplify the whole storytelling notion. These are usually integrated into the picture stories through illustrations with stylistic variations, often as parts of the artwork. Just as facial expressions physically indicate emotions in visual narratives, onomatopoeia or ideophones, audibly represent actions and sounds through visual cues enhancing the readers' sensory experiences. Unlike conventional words, ideophones or onomatopoeias frequently convey rich imagery and elicit a visceral or emotional reaction in listeners.

McCloud (1993) emphasises the deceptive nature of visual sound representations. A stylised 'SPLAT' is not a real sound, yet our instinct to comprehend such auditory cues allows us to interpret this silent medium in ways that go far beyond simply describing a noise. The use of sound in comics sheds light on how sound influences our cognition of visuals and text. McCloud further states that comics rely on readers to create a sense of progression through the connections of the panels into a coherent narrative. Similarly, the ability to comprehend stylised texts as 'sound' is an important instance of this imaginative process, where readers put their understandings to give meanings to the representations.

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According to Cohn (2022), expressions in different modalities often lack complex grammar yet can exist as single-unit forms or sequences that are simple. For instance, it might include nonsensical sounds like 'sha-la-la-la-la' or invented non-words like 'fwiggle' and 'plord'. These appear as meaningless gestures or movements and can be subjected to abstract or non-representational marks found in graphic modality. This can eventually draw meaningful expressions that do not rely on complex grammatical structures but exist as units that can stand alone or as unstructured sequences. For example, vocal expressions are primarily guided by their meaning including sounds like 'ouch', 'pow' or 'kablooey' which cannot be combined into full sentences due to the absence of grammatical rules yet make sense while the narratives are read.

Speech acts in comic books or other visual narratives include various linguistic and visual features that are used to convey information, express emotions, and proceed the story along. Comics contain both textual and visual narration, which enables multiple types of narration to occur inside a single comic panel (Tang, 2016). Textual and visual narration kinds collaborate to tell a story in comics. An outward narrative point of view in images is often combined with an inside story. This gives us a clear invisible camera view of a scenario. Tang argues that a visual external view of a character's actions can be paired with a textual internal insight into the character's mind to provide both external and internal narrative perspectives in tandem. When aligned with onomatopoeic words, this dual narrative perspective becomes even more dynamic serving as a linguistic tool that brings out the notions of external visual depiction of actions and the internal emotional or atmospheric contexts.

Under this context, this study explores the role of onomatopoeia or ideophones in selected visual narratives, shedding light on the intersection of visual culture, sound and storytelling. Therefore, its significance lies in providing cross-linguistic insights into cultural nuances and contributing to multimodal storytelling aspects, as well as offering implications in the field of communication, media and education.

To explore how visual culture is communicated in the Bengali comics, 'Hada Bhoda' (Debnath, 1962) and the Japanese manga, 'Doraemon' (Fujio, 1969) through different ideophones or onomatopoeic words, this study aims to explore how sound-symbolic expressions are embedded into the visuality of the narratives to depict different actions, emotions, and atmospheres, and consequently, how they reflect the cultural contexts of West Bengal (India) and Japan. Due to their rich use of onomatopoeias, these narratives vividly highlight sound-symbolic expressions. It is to investigate how utterances, especially in the form of ideophones carry performative functions. By making a cross-linguistic analysis of the cultural nuances of a few selected ideophones present in both narratives ('Hada Bhoda' and 'Doraemon'), the main goal is to comprehend their roles in shaping perceptions and enhancing the storytelling experience as part of the holistic genre of visual narratives.

2. Methodology

A content analysis methodology was used to accomplish the goal of this study. Krippendorff (2004) rightly pointed out that 'all reading of text is qualitative even when certain characteristics are later converted into numbers' (p. 16). Fraenkel and Wallen (2006) defined content analysis as a method used by researchers to examine human behaviour indirectly by analysing their communications. The primary goal of content analysis is to study social behaviours and experiences without influencing them. This could be accomplished by examining any form of visual or written human communication, such as items appearing in television commercials, novels, newspapers, magazines, television, speeches and many others. This study employed qualitative content analysis and provided a systemic lens to explore how ideophones from two distinct cultures (here, Bengali and Japanese) convey literal meanings, influence the narrative tone through emotional force or atmospheric contexts, and evoke specific reactions or immersive experiences among readers.

3. Findings

The analysis of onomatopoeic words or ideophones in 'Hada Bhoda' and 'Doraemon' reveals how these sound-symbolic expressions play a crucial role in enhancing the storytelling experience across the two distinct cultures— Bengali (West Bengal) and Japanese. By functioning as communicative acts, ideophones describe actions and emotions along with other atmospheric contexts; these onomatopoeias help with the readers' perceptions through cultural nuances and evoke sensory experiences through texts and images.

This section of the paper emphasises the findings by comparing different ideophones in these two visual narratives, portraying how they convey actions, emotions, and atmospheres while reflecting the unique cultural contexts of West

Bengal and Japan. Examples are analysed to demonstrate their roles as communicative acts, highlighting their contributions to the holistic genre of visual narratives or picture stories.

Figure 1 Debnath's (1962) 'Hada Bhoda Samagra' (p. 38)

Here in Figure 1, Bhoda and his friends are mocking Hada by comparing him to frogs. He exclaims, '(He is) playing frog-jump with real frogs.', which simply describes the activity of playing, involving frogs. Here, the Bengali ideophone is more significant than Bhoda's utterance which vividly captures the sound and sensation of frogs: /krojã:k kõja:k/. The sound /krojã:k kõja:k/ could be influenced by the most common noise, 'croaking' in English that a frog makes.

Figure 2 Debnath's (1962) 'Hada Bhoda Samagra' (p. 415)

In Figure 2, Hada is trying to aim at the crow with his shooting gun. But his shot missed the target and he exclaims with disappointment that it hit the bird's nest instead. As the bird takes off its flight, it is accompanied by a sharp piercing 'cawing' sound, /ka: ka:/ which is a common representation of a crow's call in Bengali culture. It typically imitates the sound of a crow and is quite similar to the English onomatopoeia, 'caw'.

Figure 3 Debnath's (1962) 'Hada Bhoda Samagra' (p. 378)

In Figure 3, Hada's father is seen to be up in the air with Hada's mixed expressions of shock and fear. It is also noticed here that some springs have erupted from beneath the fabric of the bed mattress. As a result of it, a metallic sound is used to imitate the sound of the springs that made Hada's father bounce: /poʊŋ/. This sound is also quite similar to the ideophone, 'boing', commonly used in English comics when depicting a bouncing object or character. In both cases, bilabial plosives /p/ and /b/ are used. The Bengali onomatopoeia is voiceless (softer), with English being the voiced (harder) one.

Figure 4 Debnath's (1962) 'Hada Bhoda Samagra' (p. 68)

Here, in Figure 4, Bhoda seems to be taking an act of revenge on Hada as is evident from his dialogue where he is saying that it is a 'tit for tat' as he could push him well. On the other, Hada seems too confused as he is almost falling off his playing cart. While they are in this playful act, a distinctive ideophone is noticed: the collision of two wooden carts produces a very common onomatopoeic sound in Bengali: /gʱɔtaŋ/. This is typically the 'clacking' sound which happens because of the involvement of two robust and heavy wooden objects.

Figure 5 Debnath's (1962) 'Hada Bhoda Samagra' (p. 31)

Figure 5 captures a sudden and messy moment when a bowl full of thick yogurt slips off the hands of the man in green and blue and hits the face of the other man. This is an accidental incident that is caused by the kite. The thick and creamy yogurt hitting the man's face and spreading all over makes an onomatopoeic word in Bengali, /sljæpɑːʈ/. This sound resembles the English ideophone, 'splat' which similarly describes the sound of something wet and soft hitting some surface: it occurs that the /sl/ and /sp/ sounds are interchanged.

Figure 6 Fujio's (1974) 'Doraemon'- Volume 4 (p. 130)

Figure 6, represents an eerie auditory picture as Sunio holds a snake in his hand, though it appears quite funny with the manga character. The Japanese onomatopoeia of the snake here is /suɾu suɾu/. The written ideophone on the panel also has scaly features like a snake adding extra visual effect to it. The sound captures the physical movement of the snake along with its inherent characteristic of stealth and is used to describe the English 'slithering' sound. The reduplication of the word, 'suru', depicts the ongoing action of the snake's movement. In English, we do not find reduplication of words, yet it is translated as 'slither slither' to replicate the Japanese onomatopoeic action, which is also not bringing out the original artistic essence of the action.

Figure 7 Fujio's (1974) 'Doraemon- A Selection of Touching Stories' (p. 103)

Figure 7, represents a low, deep noise made by a cruise ship: /bo:/. The /o:/ is quite prolonged and takes a longer duration representing a deep rumble of engines heard from a distance as it navigates through the sea, bringing out the essence of the visuals. The English translation 'Tooooooooooooot!', on the other, sounds more like a whistle than a deep hum of the engines. Nevertheless, the prolonged /u:/ sound still brings out the essence of the distant fog horn.

Figure 8 Fujio's (1974) 'Doraemon- A Selection of Touching Stories' (p. 100)

Figure 8, depicts a scene where the characters from 'Doraemon' are playing baseball when their ball gets stolen by a dog. Nobita, on the other, clicks a photo with a gadget given by Doraemon. The English 'click' sound is represented to be /kʰatʃe/ as the Japanese onomatopoeic word for clicking pictures. The sound also comes with star-like visuals adding more depth to the ideophone.

Figure 9 Fujio's (1974) 'Doraemon'- Volume 1 (p. 114)

Figure 9 describes a scene where Nobita's father is shaving. The repetitive action of shaving gives birth to a reduplicative onomatopoeia similar to Figure 6: /dʒoɾi dʒoɾi/. Even though English does not have reduplication, it is used here as a translation for 'SHBBB SHBBB' which also describes a subtle friction or a rubbing noise. The way, /dʒoɾi dʒoɾi/ is represented visually, gives the readers a blade-like outlook, typically resembling the sound of a blade getting rubbed on the face. To get a similar essence, the English translation is written with capital letters.

Figure 10 Fujio's (1974) 'Doraemon- A Selection of Touching Stories' (p. 046)

In Figure 10, it is seen that Nobita is getting punched right under his chin. This sudden impact also echoes in the air with a forceful Japanese onomatopoeia, /gaːt͡sə/. This also comes with star-like visuals as it is a common way of showing the speed and force of a punch in visual narratives. Even though, the typical translation for /gaːt͡sə/ would be 'Pow!', here it is used as 'Kerrrraaaaack' to portray the punch as a lightning strike.

Ideophones or onomatopoeic words are essential in the vibrant world of visual narratives, where pictures and sound effects combine to tell stories. Interestingly, these sounds can differ greatly among cultures, bringing distinct features to comparable scenarios. Similarly, this study has found certain images in 'Hada Bhoda' and 'Doraemon' that look similar but have different sounds making them culture-specific:
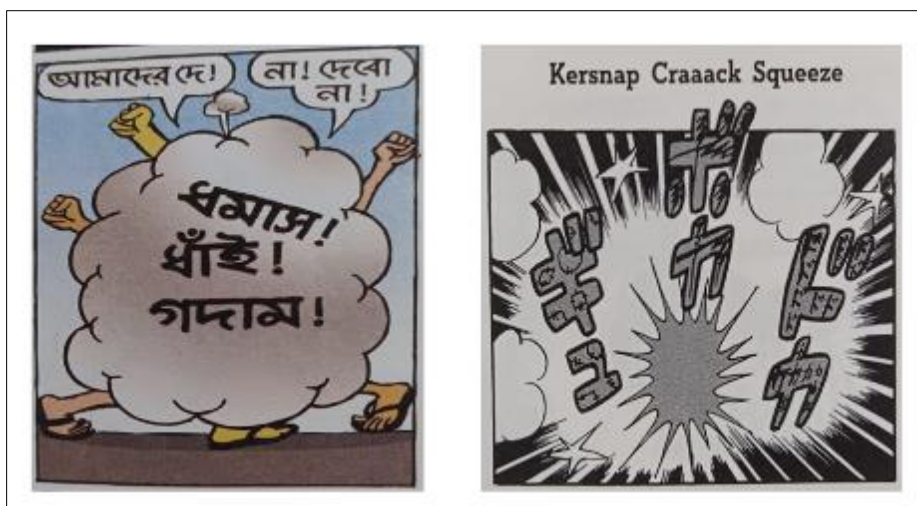
Figure 11 Debnath's (1962) 'Hada Bhoda Samagra' (p. 15)-Left; Fujio's (1974) 'Doraemon- A Selection of Touching Stories' (p. 046)-Right

The above picture, Figure 11, represents two fighting scenes from the Bengali comics, 'Hada Bhoda' (left) and the Japanese manga, 'Doraemon' (right), respectively. The scene in 'Hada Bhoda' looks quite vibrant with colours and expressive artwork. The characters who are involved in the fighting are not visible; only their hands and feet are visible. These characters are within the large bubble-like cloud of dust. This unique visual technique enhances the intensity of the fight while allowing the readers to focus on the onomatopoeic words written on the cloud. There are three very strong ideophones used here depicting the fighting scene: /ɖʱɔmɑʃ/ /ɖʱãi/ /gɔɖam/. In contrast, the fighting scene in 'Doraemon' unfolds bold, dynamic visuals that look like dusty clouds and lightning strikes to describe its intensity. Similar to the fighting scene of 'Hada Bhoda', characters are not visible; only the three onomatopoeic words bring out the true essence of the fight: /giːɯ/ /bɔːka/ /t̪ɔːka/ giving the essences of a tight grip, a sound of heavy collision and lightning strike, respectively. So, instead of putting 'Pow!', 'Bam!' and 'Crash!' which are typically used in English comics, the English version goes for a literal translation with 'Kersnap', 'Craaack' and 'Squeeze'.

Figure 12 Fujio's (1974) 'Doraemon'- Volume 5 (p. 10)- Left; Debnath's (1962) 'Hada Bhoda Samagra' (p. 487)-Right

Figure 12 reflects two similar scenes from the Japanese manga, 'Doraemon' (left) and the Bengali comics, 'Hada Bhoda' (right). The scene from 'Doraemon' shows a scary dog's bark that makes Nobita dash away in fear. The Japanese onomatopoeia or the ideophone here paints imagery that captures the essence of a dog's bark: /wʌg wʌg/. A typical dog's bark accurately depicts the nasalised sound of the 'a' vowel in Japanese, as well as the nasalised character of the final 'n', making it sound: /wãn wãn/. Here the presence of the /g/ sound at the end makes the whole panel harsher and

stronger to bring out the ferocity of the fierce dog. The translated English version is 'BOW WOW' with a repetitive syllable, 'ow' brings out the ferocious essence through the bold capital letters. On the other, 'Hada Bhoda' has a similar situation where Bhoda is chased by a less ferocious dog. Yet, Bhoda, throwing what he had in his hand, is quite scared as he tries to run away from the bark of the dog: /gʰeu/.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The study draws attention to the pivotal role of onomatopoeic words or ideophones in enriching the visual narrative experience with sound-symbolic expressions, surpassing linguistic boundaries to denote actions, emotions and atmospheres in culturally nuanced manners.

It is observed that in 'Hada Bhoda', ideophones often align with the typical Bengali narrative styles, where vivid, rhythmic expressions are used to evoke humour, drama, and the overall intensity of the storytelling method. On the other hand, 'Doraemon' reflects Japanese cultural aesthetics through its projection and conveyance.

The performative function of these ideophones further stresses their communicative significance. In both 'Hada Bhoda' and 'Doraemon', they act as linguistic and visual facets enhancing the visual and sound-symbolic qualities of the scenes. Along with depicting actions and emotions, they also encode societal behaviours, traditions and norms, making the narratives integral to the cultural resonances of the stories.

The findings of the study demonstrate that the onomatopoeic words are far more than just a part of the narratives. Rather, they are stimulating communicative acts that serve an essential part through multimodality making the whole storytelling process a holistic genre. They add to the multisensory communication engaging readers with visual metaphors and symbols embedded within the ideophones. By analysing the different ideophones present in 'Hada Bhoda' and 'Doraemon', this research reveals how the sound-symbolic expressions reflect and shape the cultural contexts of both West Bengal and Japan.

The cross-linguistic and cross-cultural analyses provide useful insights into the performative nature of onomatopoeic words and their contribution to visual storytelling. This study offers linguistics, semiotics and other visual studies an enriching analysis through the medium of meaning-making. It can also enrich our comprehension beyond linguistics in the fields of media, education and psychology by providing significant insights into how visual storytelling can be practiced universally in multicultural contexts. To conclude, the fundamental character of visual narratives when analysed through communicative acts stems from the ability to express complex concepts and emotions in a way that is relevant to a wide range of people regardless of language and culture.

Like sounds echoing in a canyon, visual representations too can highlight and amplify a narrative's depth by connecting the elements present in them with human cognition across cultures. Therefore, these onomatopoeic words refer to the visuals resonating beyond their immediate depiction, creating multimodality through emotions, actions or certain atmospheres that linger in the mind.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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