Sound Symbolic Words in Indian Comics
A Typographic Exploration

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Abstract

Comics are a visual art form that communicates through the braiding of words and images. A comics works at its best when both image and text blends harmoniously to convey meaning and effect. In comics words are primarily found in two categories:Dialogues/Narration and Sound Symbolic Words (SSWs). In this paper the scope of SSWs is enquired from a typographic perspective. Sound is an invisible entity and comic artists and designers have always tried to make it visible in the form of written words. This idea of transcription from a formless entity to a typographic entity makes it an interesting ground for research (figure 1). A sample of 200 Raj comics was chosen for this study. When sensitivity and fineness is concerned it is proposed that the artists and designers should explore freehand as well as digital creation of SSWs. Adding further, it is proposed that the sound should be first understood and then converted in to text that visually resembles the parent sound. This will lead to a better understanding of the creative process and also add to the visual lexicon of comics.
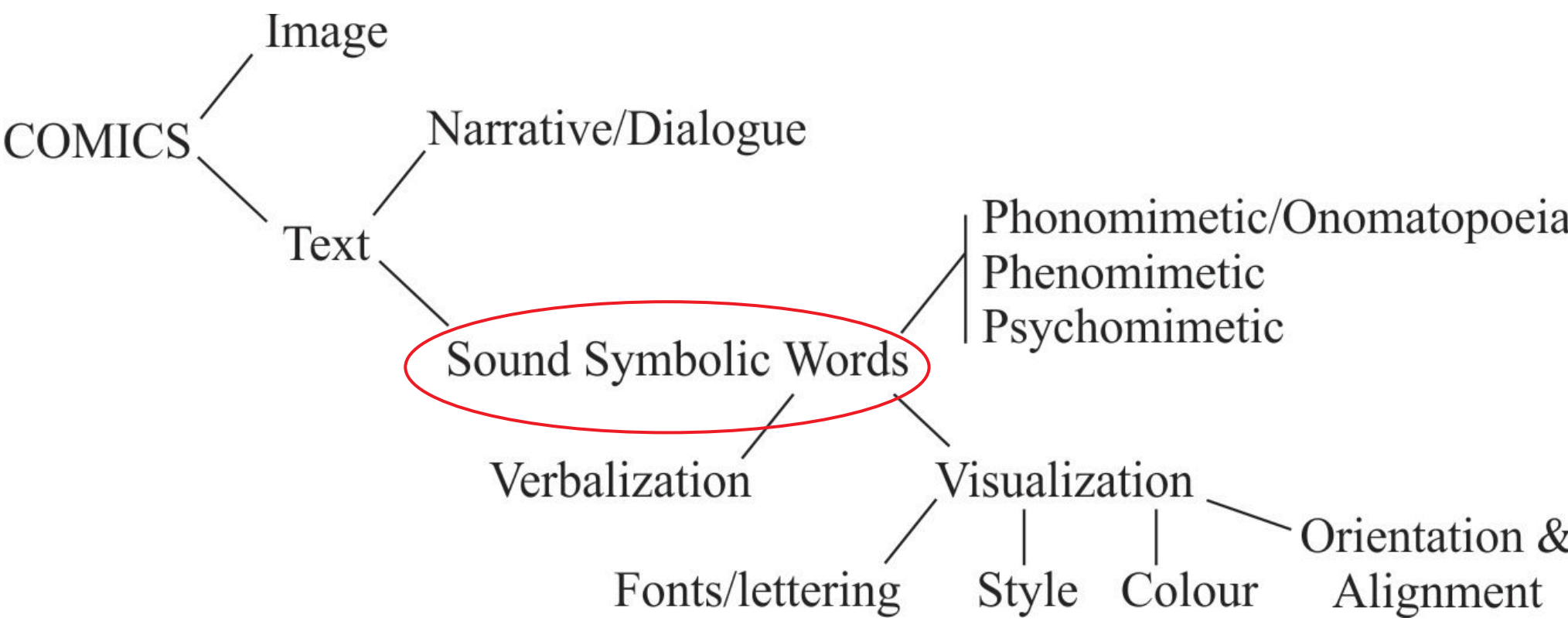
Figure 1: Structural diagram of syntactic elements in comics

Figure 2: Sound Symbolic Words in Western Comics

Sound Symbolic Words or SSWs

Considering the SSWs as linguistic sign, it can be said by the principle of linguistic sign that the bond between the signifier and signified is arbitrary [1] . While Saussure concludes that linguistic signs are arbitrary, he also adds an exception to the onomatopoeic formation of words. In comics the sound symbolic words remain an effective tool for communicating a message. This can be said based on the fact that more than thousand SSWs exist in comic books. Sound symbolism is the partial representation of the sense of a word by its sound, as in *bang, fizz,* and *slide*. The SSWs are classified in three main categories [2]:

a) **Phonomime** or **onomatopoeia**: The words that mimic actual sounds.
b) **Phenomime**: The words that depict non-auditory senses.
c) **Psychomime**: The words that depict psychological or bodily feelings.

Signifier Word	Signified Sound	Context
	Collision/Impact	Mostly used for showing collisions,accompanied by directional lines from the point of impact.
a. b.	a. Big gun(mainly automatic) b.Small gun (revolver,beretta)	These words are most of the time appear close to a shooting gun.Might apear repeatedly to depict a continuous fire.
	Punch or Kick	These words come in other variations also during a fight. A sudden and forceful kick is shown by 'Tadaak' whereas 'Thad' implies a fast punch.
	Glass Shatter	'Chanaak' stands for a instantaneous moment of action while 'Channnaak' represents a sustained sound of glass shattering.
	Wall breaking	The 's' in between the letters emphasis the sustained and huge sound made by a breaking wall or similar object.
a. b.	a. Small birds b. Crows	a.The 's' depicts the continuos suspended sound of small birds in the air.Sometimes used repeatedly to depict chaos. b. Mostly used in pairs for a crow's sound.Other variation for scavenger birds include 'Krii','Kriiiaaa' etc.
a. b.	a. Bulls,Dinosauras,any other raging animal b. Animal grumbling in anger	a. A raging bull is often shown with this word.The word creates a choked but grumbling sound. b. An angry animal is shown grumbling with this word.Repetition depicts more fury and fear.
	Water splash	This word will accompany a body falling in water. A body running on water will be depicted with an additional word 'Chapaak',in a repeated pattern.

Table 1: Categorization of SSWs in Raj comics

Variables of SSW

Style of SSW

To relate the style of the word to its corresponding sound, the verbalization of the word is a determining factor. Therefore, first it should be identified that how does the sound of the word feels? Like the *kiki* and *bouba* test proves, some words give a sensation of being sharp and edgy (like zrrrt, krriiik, fizz etc.) in nature, whereas some might convey a sense of being round and smooth (like blorb, glub, chug etc.) [3].

Figure 3: Different styles of SSW

Fonts and Lettering in SSW

'Graphically' treated lettering acts as an extension of the imagery. It creates a mood for the story and implies sound[4]. Raj comics mostly uses same font for different sounds that posits a problem while relating the word to the sound (figure 3). Both traditional hand lettering and digital platforms should be used deliberately for SSWs.

Figure 4: Different fonts for SSW

References

[1] Saussure, Ferdinand., "Course in General Linguistics", McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1916.
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