

Sound Images

Visualizing Language in Science, Literature, and Art

Conference, October 17-18, 2019

eikones – Center for the Theory and History of the Image

In his *Course in General Linguistics*, Ferdinand de Saussure defines “sound images” (*images acoustiques*) as purely psychological “representations” of linguistic sound in the brain. These representations, he famously posited, are associated with corresponding mental “ideas” (*concepts*) and constitute a system of signs (*langue*) that exists—immaterially—in the minds of all members of a given language community. Sound images, in Saussure’s understanding, are thus neither acoustic nor visual in kind; they structurally precede, and remain independent of, any “execution” in audible discourse (*parole*) and any “translation” into the graphic medium of script (*écriture*). Significantly, Saussure does not specify wherein the particular “image”-character of mental sound images actually resides. Yet his reflections make clear that the concept serves to establish both a strict separation and a distinct hierarchy between the primary linguistic data of internal consciousness and their secondary external realizations: “Language,” he contends, “is a storehouse of sound-images, and writing is the tangible form of those images.” (*CGL*, 15)

Later linguists like Roman Jakobson would criticize Saussure for his “mentalist point of view” that denigrates the material manifestations of the linguistic sign in an effort to carve out a specific domain for the new discipline of linguistics, and to secure its independence vis-à-vis 19th century sciences like acoustics, physiology, and experimental phonetics. As Saussure himself certainly knew well, it was precisely in the context of these other disciplines that the notion of sound images had previously been associated with quite different meanings and purposes. From the Romantic-scientific debates sparked by Ernst Chladni’s discovery of the so-called sound figures (*Klangfiguren*) around 1800, to the physiological analysis of voice and articulation by means of graphic methods from the 1850s onward, to new phonetic notation systems that proliferated toward the end of the century under the banner of a “visible speech” (Alexander M. Bell): What drove all these developments was a profound interest in linguistic sound images as thoroughly material—acoustic, graphic, and corporeal—phenomena. Though methodologically shunned by Saussure in the years after 1900, this interest would continue to shape not only the work of various 20th century linguists (including Jakobson, whose phonological analyses built extensively on visual records of speech sounds). It also came to inform the conception, creation, and investigation of sound images in manifold aesthetic contexts, ranging from the poetic and (typo)graphic innovations of the historical avant-garde movements (Italian Futurism, Russian *za’um*, Dada), to experimental writing strategies of the postwar era (Concrete Poetry), to the media and performance arts of the last

decades. In recent years, moreover, the imaging techniques of neuro-scientific research have given rise to another variety of sound images, which visualize speech at a cortical level and thus afford new material entry points to the brain's linguistic system.

The planned conference will bring together historians of science, literary historians, media historians and art historians to collectively explore the cultural history of linguistic sound images from the 19th through the 21st century, and to discuss questions like the following: What are the epistemic, technological, and methodological conditions under which the sound-aspect of language has been made accessible to certain forms of visual representation? Which kinds of operations (such as inscription or translation) have been theorized and performed in various historical contexts with the goal of creating *Lautbilder* at the intersection of acoustic and graphic materiality? Which semiotic principles (symbolic, iconic, indexical) have come into play in the process? And how have scientists, writers, and artists negotiated the relation between the embodied character of linguistic sound production and its preservation, transmission, and reproduction by means of various non-corporeal media?

The event is sponsored by *eikones* and the NOMIS-Foundation.

Conception and organization:

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