

Phonesthemes

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Do you snarl when you say snivel, snout, snoot, snub, snot, snob or snotty? Do you feel a certain sensation or emotion when you say sneer, sneeze, snoop? Maybe you curl your lip or say them with your teeth close together. Did you notice that words that have meaning related to the mouth or nose can start with the same two letters like the <sn> in snore. These letter strings that coincide with feelings and sounds are called phonesthemes which is derived from Greek φωνή *phone*, "sound", and αἴσθημα *aisthema*, "perception" from αἰσθάνομαι *aisthanomai*, "I perceive".

J.R. Firth first coined the term in 1930 and he described it as a particular sound or sound sequence that suggests a certain meaning. The phonestheme is different than a morpheme because when phonesthemes are on their own, like <sn>, they don't carry meaning. When a morpheme is on its own, it still carries meaning. For example, in the word <action> the morpheme <act> still carries meaning when it is separated from the suffix <-ion>.

Now think about how you feel when you describe someone who is a sloppy slouch and they leave slime on you couch, because they are sleepy. Are you smiling when you say these words? Probably not, because many words that begin with <sl> are descriptions of negative behavior. Have you ever wanted to flee or fly away? Did you book a flight and have to choose from a fleet of flights? The flow of these words is not just alliteration, they are phonesthemes that represent movement.

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The story of Humpty Dumpty reminds us that phonesthemes can occur anywhere in a word.

Humpty Dumpty was heavy and small, like a lump or a stump. Humpty dumpty was also plump.

Phonesthemes give us a chance to express our feelings with a glimmer of glee as we glance at the words that glitter and gleam with underlying meaning.

Have you ever been jarred awake by a crying baby? The sound of a car crash is abrupt and jarring, just like a crunching sound of someone crushing a beer can on his head.

It seems like lexical words get to have all the fun when it comes to phonesthemes but some function words have decided to join the party. There are two ways to pronounce <th>. One is the hard sound, like in the word this, and one if the soft sound, like in the word thumb. You can figure out which is which by holding your throat while you pronounce the /th/ and the word that produces a vibration in your throat is the voiced <th>. When we pronounce this, the, them, then, there, and they, which are all function words, we use the hard sound of <th> and we pronounce words like thimble, theater, ether, and teeth we use the soft sound.

Although English is often labeled as crazy, phonesthemes occur in all languages, because they are connected to perceived sound and emotion and these sounds and emotions are recorded as written words. They give us a way to express feelings or explain the noises we hear in language. That is just a glimpse into the glamour of language.