

Size-sound symbolism in the Polish diminutive system on the basis of the /i/ – /a/ vowel opposition

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Synesthetic sound symbolism refers to diverse instances of natural connections between certain articulatory or acoustic features of speech sounds and visual, tactile, or proprioceptive properties of objects. A particular type of this phenomenon, called “size-sound symbolism”, concerns situations in which the features seem to be correlated with the semantic field of “size”. Investigations into this theory have been pursued by many linguists, such as Otto Jespersen, Edward Sapir or, more recently, John Ohala. In initial experiments, differences in the pronunciation of vowels were analysed. For instance, Sapir examined the correlation between the degree of openness and the semantic dichotomy “big-small”. His results were confirmed also in studies carried out by many other authors and nowadays it has become commonly accepted that close and/or front vowels are perceived in the majority of languages as “smaller” than open and/or back vowels.

Among proposed explanations of these results, one of the most consistent is the so-called “kinesthetic” factor. Namely, in the case of close vowels the tongue is high up toward the roof of the mouth. Consequently, the vibrating column of air passes through a narrow resonance chamber. This small amount of space refers iconically to small objects which are symbolised by close vowels. Reversely, the position of the tongue is lower in the mouth resulting in a bigger resonance chamber in low vowels which symbolises big objects.

The aim of the current paper is to test the theory of size-sound symbolism on a number of artificial words containing natural Polish diminutive suffixes contrasting with each other only in terms of two Polish vowels – /i/ and /a/. The choice of this particular contrast is based on the initial experiments conducted by Sapir. The two vowels are the most dissimilar among all Polish vowels in respect to the vertical articulatory scale which served as the starting point in his studies.

The artificial words were created in a way which provides the examined vowels with the maximally objective phonetic context. The lexemes prepared in this way were presented to a representative group of Polish students whose task was to choose forms which they perceived as “smaller”. The obtained results confirm the assumptions of the theory of size-sound symbolism.