

**A Phonosemantic Study of Some  
English Short Stories' Titles**

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## Abstract

Language is the best means whereby people in this universe communicate their ideas and feelings. Language comprises a number of phonemes (consonants and vowels). The present study is concerned with the titles of some English short stories written for kids. It attempts to investigate the association between the meanings of sounds and the titles of some English short stories chosen to be data for this study. After analyzing such titles, it is concluded that the meanings of the titles of the chosen short stories are influenced by the sound patterns of which they are constructed. In addition, the actions of such short stories are understood by means of perceiving the meanings of such titles.

Key words: phonosemantics, short stories, titles, phonemes, semantics

## الملخص

اللغة هي افضل وسيلة يستخدمها الناس في هذا الكون للتعبير عن أفكارهم ومشاعرهم. تتألف اللغة من عدد من الأصوات (السواكن والحركات). تهتم الدراسة الحالية بعناوين بعض القصص الإنجليزية القصيرة المكتوبة للأطفال. فهي تحاول التحقق في الارتباط بين معاني الأصوات وعناوين بعض القصص الإنجليزية القصيرة التي اختيرت لتكون بيانات لهذه الدراسة. بعد تحليل هذه العناوين، تم التوصل الى استنتاج ان معاني عناوين القصص الإنجليزية القصيرة المختارة تتأثر بانماط الأصوات التي تكونها. اضافة الى ذلك، فان احداث هذه القصص القصيرة يتم فهمها من خلال ادراك معاني عناوين هذه القصص.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الدلالة الصوتية، قصص قصيرة، عناوين، فونيمات، علم الدلالة

## 1. introduction

Choosing a suitable title for a literary text including English short stories, the writer combines certain phonemes such as consonants and vowels together to form words in terms of phonological rules. Such combinations are required to be meaningful. According to Saussure (1959), there is an arbitrary relationship between a word and its referent. On the other hand, Agrawal (2020) indicates that there is a relationship between the words and the sounds that construct such words.

Language is considered the best means of communication among people in all communities. In addition, facial expressions as well as gestures are mentioned by some people to express their needs, feelings and attitudes in a systematic way. Languages comprise phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic levels. As far as a phonological level is concerned, there are segmental as well as suprasegmental features. The former includes the smallest units in the sound system of a language (consonants and vowels) whereas the latter refers to stress, intonation and rhythm. The main reason behind using a language and other tools of communication is to convey meanings among people. According to Saussure (cited in Meyer, 2009:3), a signifier is a sign with a particular form. This signifier conveys meaning called signified. Accordingly, the word "table", for instance, has two signifiers: the phonemic transcription /teibəl/ which comprises a series of phonemes, and the spelling form (t-a-

b-l-e) which consists of a series of ‘graphemes’. In this case, ‘signifiers’ are associated with the ‘signified’. In this respect, Bloomfield (1984: 145) points out that meaning is the situation where the speaker performs an utterance and that the hearer responds to him. He (Ibid) indicates that speech sounds should be taken into consideration since they lead to meanings.

Meaning, according to Johnson, (2017: 99) is formed in relation with the environment where it represents certain items for particular issues. Our needs in life are the aim behind the use of language through mind. In this case, Greene (2020: 185) asserts that life and mind complete each other. Searle cited in Johnson (1987: 180) affirms that meaningless symbols may be meaningful when they are related to user’s intention.

Pragmatically speaking, words are influenced by the context in which they are used. In this respect, it can be said that in general, language interacts with the environment in which it is used and that the words can be mentioned according to the economic and political issues within the intended context.

Language sounds are produced by means of certain organs such as the lungs, the larynx, the pharynx, the tongue, the palate (the hard palate, the soft palate and the alveolar ridge), the lips, the teeth and the nasal cavity in what may be called the vocal tract. In sound production, the brain gives a hint to organs of speech to produce sounds. Accordingly, Clark and Yallop (1995: 164) indicate that the first step is investigated by means of the nervous system which comprises two parts: central and peripheral. Speech, according to Aitcheson (1996: 63), is considered a highly complex process that requires many physical structures to take place; i.e, there are four interlinked parts needed for speech such as the brain which is described as the organizer, the lungs, the larynx, the pharynx, the palate, the tongue, the lips, the teeth and the nasal cavity that form the vocal tract responsible for the production of speech sounds. The ears are used to receive sounds. Additionally, the brain plays a major role in interpreting and understanding the messages sent by speech sounds.

## 2. Theoretical Survey

### 2.1 Phonosemantics

Phonosemantics refers to the relation or connection between phonemes and their meanings. In the this respect, a combination of certain phonemes together should have a cognizable meaning whereas an individual phoneme has no meaning. Thus, the meaning of a form (a word) is determined by the meanings of the sounds that construct such a word. Some words are distinguished from one another by means of a phoneme referred to as the smallest unit in the sound system of a particular language. In this case, Carr (2008: 123) points out that a phoneme is a distinctive sound of a specific language where a substitution of one phoneme for another creates different meanings. Consider the following example in which the two words (cat and fat) are similar but their first phonemes are different. One phoneme can have two variants (allophones) such as /k/

which can be aspirated when it occurs initially followed by a vowel sound as in car [ka:] where [k] is accompanied by a puff of breath represented by [h] above [k], or unaspirated when it occurs finally as in make [meik].

It is necessary to mention the term ‘phonology’ which is defined by Katamba (1989: 60) as the study of the sound system of a language. Thus, it is about the function of sounds in a systematic way. Jones (2006: 388) affirms that the main activities of phonology are concerned with how phonemes are combined together to form syllables and words.

Semantics is the study of meaning. The relationship between the word and its referent is expressed by means of arbitrariness, systematicity and iconicity. Arbitrariness means that there is no relationship between the meaning of the word and the sounds of which it is constructed. Systematicity means that there is a relationship between the sound and its meaning. Iconicity, on the other hand, indicates that there is a relationship between the concept and the concrete object. Some linguists don't believe in the idea of arbitrariness. Jespersen (1921), for instance, adopts the concept of naturalness. He affirms that there is a natural relation the meaning of the word and its sounds.

Jespersen (Ibid: 401) states that high front vowels represent smallness or something light whereas low back vowels express largeness or dark things. Some sounds indicate entertainment others represent sadness. The effect of size and shape can be seen within the language whose speakers connect the rounded shape to the objects where the rounded vowel is one of their sounds such as /o:/ or /u:/ as in ball /bo:l/ or moon /mu:n/. In this case, Kohler (1975: 188) indicates that the visual shape or an object can be naturally associated to its meaning. This is known as ‘a formal relation’. According to Agrawal (2016), ‘every sound says something’. He states that the sounds that compose a word are not arbitrarily mentioned. In contrast, there is a natural relationship between the meaning of the word and its sounds.

## 2.2. Sound Symbolism

Sound symbolism, according to Hinton et al. as cited in Aditaja (2018: 36) can be seen as a central idea round which other items are related such as corporal sounds, symbolism, imitative sound symbolism, synthetic sound symbolism and conventional sound symbolism. Corporal sound symbolism contains involuntary symptomatic sounds, like coughing and hiccupping in addition to expressive voice quality and interjections. The second type is imitative which refers to onomatopoeic words. The third type is synthetic which indicates that acoustic symbolization represents nonacoustic items, certain vowels, consonants and suprasegmental units to represent kinetic, tactile, or visual properties of an object or a thing (e.g. size or a shape). The fourth kind which is a conventional sound symbolism represents certain phonemes and phoneme clusters and their association with meanings or their reflection of the meaning of the form.

## 2.3. Iconicity

Iconicity is the term that stands against the idea of arbitrariness. It is considered as a natural relation between a form and its meaning. The meaning of a form can be understood by means of the form itself. Thus, there is an association between the form and its meaning. In this case, Carbera (2020: 161) points out that iconicity in language represents the sameness or analogy between the form of a linguistic sign and its meaning. The most popular form of iconicity is onomatopoeia such as *puzz* and *hiss* where the meaning of the word is recognized by its pronunciation.

## 2.4. Phonaesthesia

Phonaesthesia is the term that refers to the study of the meaning of the sounds of a language especially those that reflect their meanings. Leech (1969: affirms that this term is connected to sound symbolism to indicate meaning. Phonaesthesia can be called protosemanticism. It is coined by Firth (1930) to refer to sound clusters as a reflection of emotions and feelings. He (Ibid: 185) lists certain English words such as *slack*, *slush*, *slouch*, *sludge*, *slime* etc. It is concluded that these words are associated with the negative meaning. Such a negative meaning is not connected or reflected by individual phonemes, but by the initial consonant cluster /sl-/. Wales (2011: 317) adds that the initial consonant cluster /fl-/ in words such as *flail*, *flap*, *flush* suggests a sudden movement whereas the final cluster /-æʃ/ in the words *bash*, *smash*, *crash* and *thrash* represents a violent impact or an abrupt movement.

## 2.5. Onomatopoeia

Onomatopoeia is a term used to refer to words whose sounds mimic the object they stand for such as *buzz*, *hiss*, *tic – tac* and so on. Poets mention this type of words to attract the readers or listeners' attention. In this respect, Bussmann (1996: 836) states that the formation of onomatopoeic words is regarded an imitation of the sounds of nature such as *cock – a – doodle – doo* and *meow*. These sounds may be represented differently in other languages such as *cock – a – doodle – doo*. Mathews (2014: 277) indicates that onomatopoeia is a word form imitating a sound in nature or sounds linked with something which they denote such as *peewit* or *outch kievit* which is an onomatopoeic form referring to a lapwing whose sound is imitated.

## 3. Classification of English Phonemes

English phonemes (consonants and vowels) are classified, according to Agrawal (2020: 12 – 15), into groups in terms of their meanings as follows:

- 3.1. This group of consonants offer appearance, image or shape to the words they form. These consonants include / n /, / θ / and / ð /.
- 3.2. This group of consonants is about acquiring identity. They include / m /, / p /, / f /, / b / and / v /.
- 3.3. This group is about analyzing clarity. They include / ŋ /, / k / and / g /.



3.4. These consonants indicate deriving strength. They include the affricate consonants / tʃ / and / dʒ /.

3.5. These consonants are associated with occupying flow of time. They include / t /, / d /, / z /, / ʒ /, / s /, / ʃ / and / h /.

3.6. This group is about the lateral consonant such as / l / and the semi – vowels such as / j / and / w /.

3.7. this group is about English pure vowels including / i /, / i: /, / a /, / a: /, / u /, / u: /, / o /, / o: /, / ə /, / ə: /, / e / and / ʌ /.

#### 4. English Short Stories

The following English short stories written for kids are taken from [Butterflyfields.com/blogs/parenting-tips/tok amusing moral short stories in English for kids](https://butterflyfields.com/blogs/parenting-tips/tok-amusing-moral-short-stories-in-english-for-kids). These stories are considered as data for this study. They are summarised as follows:

##### 4.1.The Golden Eggs

There is a goose that lays one egg every day. Such an egg is referred to as a golden one. A farmer, who owns that goose, sells the golden egg in the market in order to get money to buy what he needs. The farmer thinks that there are more eggs in the goose's belly; therefore he took a knife and cut its belly but he found no egg. This greed made the farmer lose every thing.

##### 4.2.The Foolish Dog

A dog with a piece of meat in his mouth arrived at a stream. While he was crossing the bridge, he saw his shadow and he thought that there is another dog with a piece of meat. His greed led him to bark at his shadow to get that piece of meat in order to have two pieces of meat. When he opened his mouth to shout at his shadow, the piece of meat in his mouth fell into the stream. The lesson we understand from this story is that every one should be pleased with what he has.

##### 4.3.The Fox and the Grapes

There are clusters of ripe grapes hanging on a tree where a fox tries to catch them. The fox couldn't climb the tree to catch the grapes; therefore he said that the grapes are sour and that they cannot be eaten. The lesson this story gives us is that when someone cannot get anything he wants he says that he doesn't like it.

##### 4.4. The Ant and the Grasshopper

There are an ant and a grasshopper. They live near each other. The ant always works hard. She collects food for her family during summer and she saves some of this food for winter. The grasshopper spends its time singing in summer without collecting food. One day the grasshopper asked the ant for some food in winter, but she didn't give him

any food pretending that her food is enough only for her family. The lesson the ant gave to the grasshopper is that he should work hard and save food for hard times.

#### 4.5. The Honest Woodcutter

There is a woodcutter in the forest. He uses his axe as the only tool to cut wood to make his living. One day, this tool fell into the river. This makes the woodcutter cry. Then God appeared and asked the woodcutter about why he was crying. He replied that he lost his axe. The God showed the woodcutter a golden axe and a silver one and asked if one of these axes is related to him. The woodcutter replied that none of these axes is his. After that, the God showed the woodcutter a wooden axe and he replied that this is his own axe. As a result of this honesty, the God was pleased and he gave the woodcutter all the three axes.

#### 4.6. The Thirsty Crow

One day, a crow was in need of water. He was thirsty. He tried to find water but he couldn't find any drop of water. Then the crow found a pitcher inside which there is some water but he couldn't reach this water. He looked here and there and found some pebbles. He dropped these pebbles one by one inside the pitcher in order that the water level could reach the crow to drink water and quench his thirst. This story gives us a lesson that one should be patient and not to lose hope when he insists on getting something.

#### 4.7. The Fox and the Stork

The fox served soup in bowls for himself and the stork. It is easy for the fox to eat the soup, but the stork could not reach the soup because of his beak. This situation makes the stork angry and led him to think of how to make the fox face the same problem. In this case, the stork served soup in a vase with a narrower neck where the fox cannot reach. The lesson we benefited from this story is that one should not treat others badly because he may face the same difficult situation.

The moral lesson is not to ill – treat someone. It will always come back to you.

### 5. Data Analysis

This section is concerned with the Phonosemantic analysis of the short stories' titles. Each sound has more meanings. The researcher has chosen the suitable meaning of the sound depending on the purpose of the study. Accordingly, the meanings of the sounds that construct the titles of the short stories under study are chosen appropriately to represent the general meaning of the short story. In the following points, the phonemic transcription and the dictionary meaning of each word in the short stories' titles are stated in addition to the meanings of each sound.

#### 5.1. The Golden Eggs

golden / gəʊldn /: adj. of gold or like gold in value or colour.

eggs / egz /: female reproducing cell; ovum.

/g/ clarity, /ə/ existence, /u/ inside, /l/ apparent availability, /d/ had, /n/ fullness of identity.

/e/ existence of visible existent, /g/ clarified non – strength, /z/ lively expression.

The meaning of (golden) in this title is {an existence which is clearly full of identity inside.

The meaning of (eggs) is {visible existence with no strength}.

The meaning of the whole title is an existence full of life and identity with no strength.

## 5.2 The Foolish Dog

foolish / fu:liʃ /: without reason, sense or good judgement.

dog / dog /: common domestic animal.

/ f / unprotected, / u: / accepting existent inside, / l / lack of concentration, / i / without force, / ʃ / lively past experience.

/ d / activated, / o / acceptable indicated existent, / g / decision.

The meaning of (foolish) is {unprotected existence that lacks concentration without force}.

The meaning of (dog) is {existence that decides to be activated}.

The meaning of this title is an existence that decides to be activated with lack of concentration and without force.

## 5.3. The Fox and Grapes

fox / foks /: wild animal of the dog family.

grapes / greips /: green or purple berry growing in clusters on vines.

/ f / unsupported, / o / acceptable indicated existence, / k / alertness, / s / outside expression.

/ g / clarity, / r / lack of expansion, / e / specific existence, / i / existent, / p / towards acquiring the identity, / s / clear.

The meaning of (fox) is {an existence with unsupported alertness}.

The meaning of (grapes) is {a specific existence with clear identity and it lacks expansion}.

The meaning of the title is an existence with unsupported alertness. It has clear identity with lack of expansion.

## 5.4. The Ant and the Grasshopper



ant / ant /: small insect, proverbial for industry, that lives in highly organized societies.

grasshopper / grashopə /: jumping insect which makes a shrill, chirping noise.

/ a / visibility of existence, / n / fullness of identity, / t / activated.

The meaning of (ant) is {an activated existence full of identity}.

/ g / classified non – strength, / r / fullness of acquired concentration, / a / visibility of existent, / s / application of physical clarity, / h / availability, / o / acceptable indicated existent, / p / towards acquiring the identity, / ə / existence.

The meaning of (grasshopper) is {a visible existence clarified with no strength}.

The meaning of the whole title is an activated existence with identity and a visible existence clarified with no strength.

### 5.5. The Honest Woodcutter

honest / onist /: not telling lies; not cheating or stealing, straight forward.

woodcutter / wudkΛtə /: a man who cuts down trees.

/ o / acceptable indicated existence, / n / fullness of identity, / i / noticeable existence, / s / visible expression, / t / activated.

The meaning of (honest) is {an activated existence full of identity}.

/ w / acceptable existence, / u / existent, / d / had, / k / alertness, / Λ / revealed, / t / activating, / ə / existence.

The meaning of (woodcutter) is {a visible noticeable existence who had revealed activity and alertness}.

The meaning of the title is an existence with identity, activity and alertness.

### 5.6. The Thirsty Crow

thirsty / Θə:sti /: having or causing thirst. Feel thirsty. Some kinds of food make someone thirsty.

crow / krəu /: a large, black bird with a harsh cry.

/ Θ / decided, / ə: / available existent, / s / visible expression, / t / activated, / i / visibly existent.

The meaning of (thirsty) is {available existence decided to be activated}.

/ k / alertness, / r / fullness of acquired concentration, / ə / existence, / u / existent.

The meaning of (crow) is {an existence full of concentration and alertness}.

The meaning of the title is an existence full of concentration and alertness which decided to be activated.

### 5.7. The Fox and the Stork

fox /foks /: wild animal of the dog family, with red fur and a bushy tail, preserved in Britain for hunting.

stork /sto:k /: large, long – legged, white wading – bird (some of which build their nests on the tops of high buildings).

/ f / towards acquiring the identity, / o / towards existent, / k / alertness, / s / application of physical clarity.

The meaning of (fox) is {an existence existed with alertness}.

/ s / application of physical clarity, / t / activated, / o: / availability of existent, / k / alertness.

The meaning of (stork) is {an activated existence with alertness}.

The meaning of this title is an existence with activity and alertness.

### 6. Conclusions

The present study investigates the relationship between the meanings of the English phonemes (consonants and vowels) according to Agrawal (2020: 12 – 15) and the titles of the seven English short stories written for kids and chosen to be data for this study as illustrated in the previous sections. It can be concluded that understanding the meaning of the title of any text leads to recognizing and perceiving the main actions of such a text. Accordingly, writers and authors of literary texts or short stories are aware of how to choose the suitable titles that convey the meaning and the main actions of their texts and that the readers can perceive them easily.

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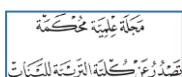
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