

Imitation of bird song in folklore – onomatopoeia or not?

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Abstract

There are a number of expressions in Swedish and other languages, which describe the songs of different birds, e.g. the rose finch imitated as saying "Pleased to see you". These folk rhymes seem to both imitate the birds' songs and to describe some content connected to the bird. Swedish folk rhymes for the songs of different birds were analyzed in terms of sound structure and content. Imitation of the bird songs is reflected in both vowels and consonants of the folk rhymes, e.g. in speech sounds with energy on low frequencies, such as [m], [u], [o], or speech sounds with energy on high frequencies, such as [s], [t], [i]. Vibrant sounds are often transformed into [r]. Imitation also conserves the number of "syllables", i.e. the rhythmic structure of the bird songs. Intonation variation is also transformed into words like "falling", "down", "up". A special case of transformation of intonation variation is seen when the melody of the bird is interpreted as emotional or attitudinal, and transferred into words like "snälla" (please) and "fy" (shame on you).

The creation of folk rhymes could be seen as a type of folk etymology. In folk etymologies an incomprehensible series of sounds is heard and interpreted in terms of already existing words that fit the context, in the language one knows. Folk etymologies can be seen as a productive force in language development. A non-arbitrary connection between sound and content can aid memory and facilitate language learning.

Introduction

There are a number of expressions in Swedish and English, and probably in many other languages as well, that describe the songs of different birds. An example in English is the rose finch described as saying "Pleased to see you". A Swedish example is the chaffinch (bofink) saying "Snälla, snälla mamma får jag gå på bio ikväll klockan tio, klockan tio" (Please, please mom can I go to the movies tonight at ten, at ten) or "Trilla nerför trappan – nu är jag här"¹ (Fall down the stairs - now I'm here².) The Swedish ornithologist association <http://www.sofnet.org/> has made a collection of these folk rhymes for birds.

There are different types of bird song: fixed pattern (the great tit), combination of patterns (the blackbird) and imitating (the parrot). The

ones that have folk rhymes are mostly the birds with a fixed pattern.

The question is now what the origin of these folk rhymes for bird songs is. Is there onomatopoeia involved or are these folk rhymes solely invented from cultural beliefs about the birds and other associations? If we imitate – what is it that we imitate? Or do we hear what we want to hear when the signal is unclear to us, and, if so, what is it we want to hear in the case of birds?

Method

Approximately 130 Swedish folk rhymes for bird song were studied and a part of these were analyzed in detail according to sound structure and content. The folk rhymes were paired with recordings of the corresponding birds and a preliminary analysis in terms of phonemes, features and number of syllables of the rhymes was compared to an auditory analysis of sounds, number of syllables and intonation curves of the birds' songs. Exactly what the properties of the bird song that are perceived as syllables are, will

¹ Due to limited space the examples will not be written in IPA.

² The English translations are rough approximations to the wording of the rhymes, which sometimes have an uncommon grammar in Swedish.

not be analyzed here. An initial analysis of the content of the folk rhymes was made.

Examples of some of the folk rhymes are:

Domherren: Jul, jul, jul. Snö, snö, snö
(The bullfinch: Christmas ..., Snow, ...)
Skogsduvan: Gå då!
(The stock dove: Then go!)
Turkduvan: Men gå då!
(The collared dove: But please go!)
Ringduvan: Men gå då, ändå!
(The ring dove: But please go, anyway!)
Gransångaren: Salt sill, salt sill, salt sill
(The chaffinch: Salt herring, ...)
Hönan: Ägg, ägg, upp i tak
(The hen: Egg, egg, up in the ceiling).

Analysis

The great tit

The sounds in rhymes for the disyllabic great tit (saying Edit! (a name); whiskey, whiskey, whiskey; tittut-tittut-tittut-tittut (peekaboo-)) are the following. The rhymes contain a majority of sounds with energy at high frequencies, e.g. [s], [t], front vowels with high F2, e.g. [i] (acute vowels and consonants in Jakobson's terminology).

The rhymes of the trisyllabic great tit (saying Här ska såås, här ska såås (We're going to seed), Var är du? (Where are you?), Kyss en skit! (Kiss a shit), Vintern tö, vintern tö (Winter thaw), Titta hit titta hit, jag är gul och svart och vit (look here look here, I am yellow and black and white) have the same type of sound inventory as the bisyllabic bird but these rhymes are trisyllabic.

The choice of words for the great tit are for example connected to early spring, when the bird appears again after winter, or to the colours of the bird. Other associations could be personal. But the words of the rhymes have been chosen to fit the sounds of the bird.

The chaffinch

The rhymes for the chaffinch (bofink) also have sounds on high frequencies as well as preserving the amount of syllables in the bird's song. Some other features are cross representational: the begging intonation of the chaffinch (starting high and then falling with modulations in the end) is translated into "Snälla, snälla" (please) or

simply transformed from the falling intonation into the phrase "Trilla nerför trappan – nu är jag här" (Fall down the stairs – now I'm here.) Intonation becomes words.

The words chosen in rhymes for the chaffinch are thus, in these cases, describing the intonation of the bird's song.

The willow warbler

The song of the willow warbler (lövsångare) is similar to the long falling and varying melody of the chaffinch, and is interpreted as "Och vi som hade det så bra och så blev det så här" (We who had it so good and yet it became like this). The falling, complaining melody is transferred into a complaining sentence.

The doves

Another type of bird song is represented by the doves, the stock dove (skogsduva), collared dove (turkduva) and the ringdove (ringduva). The stock dove is said to call Gå då! (Then go!), Så kom (Come then), Skogis, skogis, skogis (Woody, woody), Ove, Ove, Ove (a name), Du sju (You seven), Ja tu (Me two), Du du som tog mina sju sju (You you, that took my two two). The rhymes are disyllabic just as the bird's call, and they are imitating the low frequency (grave) character by using vowels with energy on low frequencies, e.g. [u] and [o]. The consonants are more grave than for the finches. One rhyme associates to the woods (skog), which fits well with both the bird's sounds and the environment in which the bird lives.

The collared dove is trisyllabic and the rhymes are similar to the rhymes of the stockdove: Men gå då (But please go), Så kom då (So come then); Så gå då (So please go), Turkiet, Turkiet, Turkiet (Turkey), Kom Josef, kom Josef (Come Joseph). The latter associations go to the origin of the dove and are chosen so that they fit the dove's song.

The ringdove uses 5 syllables, where the second is usually stressed, saying: Men gå då, ändå, (But please go), Men gå då nån gång (But please go some time), Så kom då, ändå (So come then, anyway), Min älskling du är (My darling you are), Men ja har ju två, men ja har ju två (ringar) (But I have two, but I have two (rings)), Men RING då nån gång (But ring me sometime), Ja haar ju en ring (I do have a ring), Du tog sju för tu, din tjuv (you took seven for two, you thief), Jag vill ha smörgås, jag vill ha smörgås (I want a sandwich), Du tog min hustru

du (You took my wife, you), Du är tokig, du är dum (Your are crazy, you are stupid). The sound analysis is the same as for the other doves. There are many words with sounds which have energy on low frequencies as [o] in "gå" and "då". (There are also a lot of words with [u] as in "du", "sju", "tjuv", which has energy also on high frequencies but which phonologically often counts as a back vowel.) There are also many nasals. The contextual associations go to the ring-like pattern on the neck of the dove, but there is also one rhyme using the homonymy of the word ring. The vowel of the word "ring" does not have energy on low frequencies, and so the need for a certain association sometimes overrides onomatopoeia in the choice of words.

The yellowhammer

Yet another interesting bird is the yellowhammer (gulspär). It has a song with seven syllables and this is generally imitated in the rhymes: Sitt sitt sitt sitt sitt å skiiit (sit, ... and shit), Se se se se se shiit (see, ... shit), Vi-vi-vi-vi-visingsö (Visingsö is the name of an island), 1 2 3 4 5 6 sjuuuu (seven), Fy på dig Nisse lille fy (Shame on you little Nisse, shame on you), Nu är sommaren snart slut (Now the summer is soon over), Ett två tre fyra fem sex sjuuu, jag är liten jag är guuul (one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, I am little I am yellow), The sounds of the rhymes are generally on high frequencies, e.g. [i], [s]. The scolding content in the end of some of the rhymes, as in skit (shit), fy (shame on you) could be due to the outdrawn coarse voice quality in the end of the bird song, a type of emotional prosody that is interpreted by the listener and becomes transferred into words.

The common snipe

The [r] is imitated in words chosen for the rhymes imitating the common snipe (enkelbeckasin) in Herrarna, herrarna, herrarna (the men/boys), Grebba lilla, grebba lilla (little woman/girl). The common snipe has a distinctly vibrating call. Other words for men and women could have been used, but the onomatopoeic words, containing [r], were the ones chosen.

The chifffaff

The chifffaff (gransångare), in English having a name imitating its song, is going on with its Salt sill, salt sill, salt sill (salt herring). The clear

sound of the rhyme is the [s], a sound on high frequencies.

The swallows

The different swallows with their long twitters are usually described as telling long stories, often about Virgin Mary. The sound imitation is not obvious.

Comparison between languages

Comparing the different rhymes of the yellowhammer (gulspär) shows some similarities between Swedish and English sound codification in folk rhymes. In English the bird has e.g. the following variations: Give me bread and some more cheese, Bread and butter but no cheese. The structure which is similar to the Swedish rhymes is the extended final [i] and the rhymes having seven syllables.

The rhymes for the rose finch in English are Pleased to see you, Glad to see you, etc and in Swedish the rhymes are Se video, Köp en video, Skit i de du. In both languages the rhymes have 4 syllables and they end with [u]. [i] is also present in the rhymes, while the consonants are varying more between English and Swedish.

The content of the rhymes are different for these two birds.

Imitating sounds in making other sounds

Another way of imitation is described for the wood warbler (grönsångare): take a two-crown silver coin, spin it on a marble table and you get the falling little song (trudelutt) of the wood warbler. And for the dunno (järnsparv): stir your fingers amongst iron pennies (ettöringar) and you get the song of the dunno.

Conclusions and discussion

The sounds (vowels and consonants) of the rhymes for bird song seem to divide birds into birds with high pitched songs, imitated with e.g. [s], [t] and [i] and those with low pitched songs, imitated with e.g. [o], [u], [ʊ], nasals and voiced consonants. Vibrating sounds are imitated as [r]. The number of "syllables" in the bird song are often imitated with great precision. The intonation variation is sometimes transferred into words (falling down the stairs). The rising pitch of the hen is transformed into words: ägg, ägg, upp i tak (egg, egg, up in the ceiling).

A special case is when the meaning of the intonation or prosody sounds emotional and it

gets transferred into words (snälla, fy). This is the same phenomenon as in human expression of emotions; you can choose words or prosody for expression of emotions.

The choice of words, usually delimited by the need for certain sounds, is focussed on certain areas of common life, e.g. food, seasons, social relations (the rooster saying: upp alla nu, klockan är sju (up everyone now, it's seven o' clock)). Another common association is the physical appearance of the bird. On the other hand, many of the traits of folklore in general and for birds in particular might be detected in the different rhymes; the importance of the unusual, associative thinking, the importance of the first and the last, the importance of the meeting, the part in relation to the whole (cf. Tillhagen, 1977).

The creation of folk rhymes can be seen as a kind of folk etymology. In folk etymologies an incomprehensible series of sounds is heard and these sounds are interpreted in terms of already existing words that fit the context. Folk etymologies can be seen as a productive force in language development and it is common in children.

The salient sound properties seem to be rhythmic variations, high vs low frequency sounds and vibrant sounds. Crossrepresentational transformations from intonation to words or phrases are seen.

In general, the songs of the birds are imitated quite clearly, so onomatopoeia is an important factor in the creation of these folk rhymes. The choice of words can be seen as secondary; the contents associated to a certain bird can be expressed with different words but the words chosen are the most onomatopoeic.

The folk rhymes for bird songs is yet an example, albeit a small one, of motivated expressions in language and the interaction between sound and context in creating expressions. As shown in other studies (e.g. Kovics et al, 2010), a connection between sound and content can facilitates language learning. Iconicity is part of this (the connection between bird song and language sounds) and metonymy is another part (choosing imitating words that are appropriate in the physical or social context.) The creation of folk rhymes for bird song is partly a mnemonic trick to learn the different songs of birds, partly an irresistible process to interpret meaning when one listens to bird song.

References

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