

# The origin of language:

## Series 1



*Chetna Consultancy Services*  
*Business Progression through People Development*

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## INTRODUCTION

The most largely used language for business communication is English. We as Indians have to thank the British for introducing the language to us. Had it not been for the fact that we started using English more than 100 years ago, we would not have been placed so prominently on the World Map. India, boasts of professionals in all fields, and they use the English language to score over their counterparts from other countries.

In fact, is there any place we can think of where one does not require English...?

Lets take a look at the big ITES boom, where we are faced with an imbalance between the demand and the supply. The demand is shooting up every day. BPOs, KPOs, IT service providers need to have their employees to be proficient with English.

With this article we intend to help uncover the clues and solve the mysteries surrounding the English language. This will help teachers as well as students in creating a better understanding of the English language. It will be my attempt to help explain the nuances of the language to all the trainers and teachers involved in training people on 'Voice & Accent' or making the students speak globally comprehensible English.

This is a collection of examples, anecdotes from our daily lives, and experiences from the batches of people trained over the years.

All in all a guide from a trainer who has only just attempted to unravel the mystery surrounding the language and can only stand back and admire the intricacies of the language.

Stumbling across new clues is exciting, but sharing these gives me even more excitement and joy.

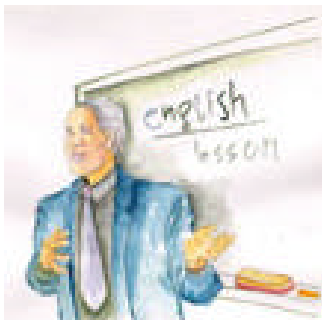
## STUMPED!

Recently at a training program, someone asked me, "How was the dictionary made?" and I sat there stumped. Stumped not because of lack of knowledge but because of the fact that this is more than a yes... no... maybe question. It demands, and let me clarify, invites me to launch into a discussion about how things came about... words came about... It's like His creation that fell into perfect harmony one by one; something borrowed something blue... well lots of borrowed words in English. From Greek, Latin, French... and now even Hindi, otherwise what could the word 'garam masala' possibly be doing in the pronunciation dictionary?

With such diversity and such flavor was the English language formed that it is hard to see it as a stand-alone 'English' English. It is like a melodious piece of music, which falls together in perfect harmony oblivious to the place of origin giving it a unique flow and rhythm. Imagine listening to a song with soft Punjabi lyrics on Karnatic music. Yes, to many of us, 'soft Punjabi' may be oxymoronic- but look further and notice the style of music. I just heard such a song and really liked it, it was a surprise that it fell into such perfect harmony!

And that word- origin, holds the key to all our questions about the intricacies of the language, the rules of the language, be it spelling, syllabification, pronunciation... anything and everything.

It's sad to see how many people from our community of trainers- voice and accent training have fallen prey to the line- 'That's the way it is' or 'Because English is a funny language'. So funny that we are falling off our seats laughing, I am sure the customers can vouch for the levels of 'funny' we are helping them explore with our language.



When we are stuck with a question to which we do not know the answer, the easiest answer is given in the previous paragraph. Some people may actually build an answer on the spot, which could be absolutely wrong. Or acknowledge that we will check the answer and get back to the learner, or keep it in a parking lot and forget!

An ideal trainer is the one who has an ability and willingness to solve a learner's question- and that could happen in two ways:

- 1) You already know the answer and solve the query
- 2) You actually check the answer and get back within the allotted time.

Guess what, there IS an answer. ALWAYS. It's up to you to find it.

## ORIGIN OF LANGUAGE

*The genesis of the language is not to be sought in the prosaic, but in the poetic side of life; the source of speech is not gloomy seriousness, but merry play and youthful hilarity... In primitive speech I hear the laughing cries of exultation when lads and lassies vied with one another to attract the attention of the other sex, when everybody sang his merriest and danced his bravest to lure a pair of eyes to throw admiring glances in his direction. Language was born in the courting days of mankind.*

*-Otto Jespersen (1921)*

So what happened? Did someone just mouth a couple of sounds together to make it a word and did that person or more people of the community keep creating sounds? If so, how did the others get to know of the same combination, if not, are we talking of one man? We have no proof, no dusty tapes to listen to, no fragments of bones to check, no old records to read and find out who truly created language and how he/she created it? All we have are WORDS, millions of words, hundreds of rules, another thousand exceptions. WORDS.

It originally started with SIGN LANGUAGE. Since human beings moved around in small groups, they could manage by using a limited number of signs to communicate. Initially there were only visual signs and when visibility was not perfect, the need for vocal signals arose. This may have been the way, verbal communication evolved.

The Bible talks about the evolution of language as, "whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof" (Genesis 2:19) On the other hand, Hindus say that Saraswati was the creator of languages. The source of language seems to be 'divine'.

Many experiments were carried out to test this, and they had contradictory results. The idea they were working on was, that if an infant is left alone on their own, they would spontaneously use the words created by God or by their 'divine source'. A pharaoh, Psammetichus conducted an experiment in Egypt in 600 BC to prove the 'divine intervention'. They left 2 infants with a mute shepherd and goats for company for 2 years. At the end they heard the word 'bekos' from one of the children. This word stands for 'bread' in Egyptian language and this experiment was treated as a big breakthrough ... or so they thought till they heard some skeptics who suggested that the 'be' is something they heard from a goat and copied it and the 'kos' could have been just a sound they created.

There are various other views about the origin of language. Plato thought that there was a 'perfect' language, which human beings were striving to discover. Socrates thought that onomatopoeic imitation was the basis of language.

## ONOMATOPOEIA

on·o·mato·poe·ia



Another view about the formation of language talks about how, the words are based on the sounds and that they were just imitations of the sounds the primitive men and women heard around them. There are many words in the English language that echo the sound that the object creates. These words in all languages that are reflections of the sounds created are called **onomatopoeic**.

The dictionary meaning:

- 1) The naming of a thing or action by a vocal imitation of the sound associated with it.
- 2) The use of a words whose sound suggest the sense

Source: <http://www.m-w.com/cgi-bin/dictionary?book=Dictionary&va=onomatopoeia>

- ❖ This is not so unusual a term among those who write about words—though linguists today often prefer others, like *echoism* or *imitation*.
- ❖ It is also known as 'sound symbolism'
- ❖ The Greeks had a word for it, and we have borrowed it through Latin: *onomatopoiia*, the process of making words, which derives from *onoma*, a name, and *poiein*, to make.
- ❖ We have extended the meaning beyond just making words to making words in a specific way—by echoing a sound that is linked to the thing we want to name.

English is full of such terms. Among them are repetitive childish imitations like *boo-hoo*, *choo-choo* and *bow-wow*, and exclamations such as *argh* and *ouch*.



It's not only single words that can be onomatopoeic. Such devices bring out the full flavor of words. Comparison and association are sometimes strengthened by syllables, which imitate or reproduce the sounds they describe.

Edgar Allan Poe, in his famous poem "The Bells", lets us hear the different kinds of sounds made by different types of bells. His choice of the right word gives us the right sound when he speaks of "tinkling" sleigh bells; "clanging" fire bells; mellow "chiming" wedding bells; "tolling," "moaning," and "groaning" funeral bells.

THE BELLS: <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/bells-the/>

## Onomatopoeic Words:

They can appear in various forms:

### i) Noun

There was a *rush* to buy drinks, and hear more details

### ii) Adjective

Whatever happened was so quickly Harry didn't catch it, but a scream of rage from the Irish crowd, and Mostafa's long, *shrill* whistle blast, told him it had been a foul.

### iii) Adverb

Mr Malfoy didn't dare say anything. He nodded *sneeringly* to Mr Weasley,

### iv) Verb

'So that's a house-elf?' Ron *muttered*. 'Weird things, aren't they?'

### v) Interjections

Words like *Ouch! Wow! Ah! Oh! Oops!* etc., are the interjections that follow the same theory and are based on sounds of exclamations on being exposed to a sudden emotional experience.

Source: [http://www.uni-bielefeld.de/lili/personen/mpaetzold/0506wise/lexis/lexis\\_12\\_student\\_project\\_onomatopoeia.pdf](http://www.uni-bielefeld.de/lili/personen/mpaetzold/0506wise/lexis/lexis_12_student_project_onomatopoeia.pdf)

A quack-quack here,  
a quack quack there,  
here a quack, there a quack...

**Bees- Buzz**

**Birds- Chirp/  
chirrup**

**Cats- Meow**

**Chicken- Cluck**

**Chicks- cheep**

**Cows- moo**

**Crows- caw**

**Ducks- Quack**

**Frogs- rabbit**

**Horses - Neigh**

**Lion- Roars**

**Mice- Squeak**

**Owls - Hoot**

**Pigs- Oink**

**Sheep- Bleat**

**Snakes- hiss**

All the words listed on the right are onomatopoeic

## Suggestive Onomatopoeia

- ❖ And in no time at all, *hundreds upon hundreds of pairs of feet* could be heard, passing the tent.
- ❖ The horntail didn't seem to want to take off, she was so protective of her eggs. *Though she writhed and twisted, furling and unfurling her wings* and keeping those fearsome yellow eyes on Harry, she was afraid to move too far from them but he had to persuade her to do it, or he'd never get near them ... the trick was to do it *carefully, gradually ...*

In **suggestive onomatopoeia**, the onomatopoeic effect is on a different level. Not (only) a single word is onomatopoeic but for example the rhythm and rhyme of a sentence.

Tennyson makes us feel the heaviness of a drowsy summer day by using a series of "in" sounds in the wonderfully weighted lines:

*The moan of doves in immemorial elms,  
And murmuring of innumerable bees.*

The repetition of 'r' and 'm' gives a drowsy hum effect.

*"I chatter over stony ways, in little sharps and trebles,  
I bubble into eddying bays, I babble on the pebbles."*

(Source: [http://www.tnellen.com/cybereng/lit\\_terms/onomatopoeia.html](http://www.tnellen.com/cybereng/lit_terms/onomatopoeia.html) )

## Auditory

- ❖ For a few seconds, Frank could hear nothing but the fire *crackling*.

**Non Auditory** (describing the 'sound' of something non-auditory)

- ❖ he seemed to be looking at everything around him through some sort of *shimmering*, transparent barrier, like a heat haze,

**Animal sounds** (Though here used as non animal sounds)

- ❖ 'I always thought he had a nasty look about him, right enough,' *grunted* a man at the bar.
- ❖ 'Did sir just call me Dobby?' *squeaked* the elf curiously, and then (Ludo) spoke over the *roar* of sound that was now filling the packed stadium;

## Everyday sounds

'They are going to *crash!*' screamed Hermione next to Harry.

## Machine sounds

e.g. in the area of automobiles, "*honk*" for the horn or "*vroom*" for the engine

Ding Dong



Tring tring!



Tick Tock



Clackety  
Clack



Pitter Patter



## Examples

- "The woman whacked the fly".
- "The bomb went kaput!"
- "The hedgehog was snuffling about in a pile of autumn leaves."
- "The girl moved about in her swishing skirt with a lot of aplomb."
- "I snapped my fingers in class today.
- "Don't clang those pots and pans."
- "The door creaked, the house squeaked, my head thumped, and I realized it was time to get up."
- "The player kicked puffs of dirt at the umpire."
- "The deer rustled the leaves as it leaped through the forest."
- "The bomb went boom!"
- "She walked in, and bang went the gun."
- "The tires came to a screeching halt!"
- "The oven timer went ding when the cookies were done."
- "When I shot the basketball, it swooshed into the net."

An initial '-fl' sound is often associated with the idea of moving light as in  
**FLAME, FLICKER, FLARE, FLASH, and FLIMMER!**

## Cartoons:

We use **counter-onomatopoeia**, by turning words into sounds.  
 For eg: a storm could be represented by the word: GROWL or CRACK  
 written in enormous and distorted characters

Atishoo	Grr	thwack
Brr	hee haw	ting a ling
Cock a doodle do	pom pom	tst tsk
yum yum	puff puff	tut tut
glug glug	Purr	vroom
Gobble gobble	rat-tat	whirr
Phew	Whew	Sigh

An initial 'sl-' sound, as in SLIMY, SLIPPERY, SLEAZY, SLUSHY, SLITHER,  
 SLUGS give the impression of.. you know what!

boo hoo	ding dong	hotch potch	tring tring
clackety clack	Dingaling	knock knock	wishy washy
clickety clackety	hippety hoppety	pitter patter	yackety yak
criss cross	hocus pocus	tick tock	zig zag

### Human sounds/expressions:

A huge *groan* rose from the Irish seats.

### Exercise:

From the italicized words, spot the onomatopoeic words:

When she looked up to see, birds flying in a *fleet*, she wanted to fly, to know "Who am I?" She saw a snail *dragging* his way through. She asked him "Why don't you fly like others do?" The *squiggly* little creature *twisted* & *turned*, *wiggled* & *wriggled*, and *sputtered* & *spluttered*, "Who do you think you are?" She *quivered* when he said, "You look like a wheatear". She *gulped* and replied, "I don't know, who am I". And *sniffing*, she turned away...

"Your *rambling* is a waste", he *snuffled*. "Find your hidden talents and make the grade" and in a *flash* he disappeared.

Would she ever be able to bear the *sneering* eyes? She *sighed*.. perhaps it was worth a try. But all that she heard was a *wheezing* voice..

She was smitten by his words as they kept *jangling* on her over wrought nerves, they *rattled* and they *clanked* till she would agree to hear the *ticking* of reason in her ears. Seeing her reflection in water, she *preened* at her smudgy silhouette and, *tweaking* her curls, decided to pirouette. What started with a *mumbled murmur*, became a *whoop* of delight, and she *crooned*... In an incorrigible voice she sang for hours and they *flittered*, *snooped*, *swooped* down in flocks to see. They *rushed* from those faraway lands to *gush* about her philosophy and *smacked* requests to judge her vanity. This *squashed* all doubts about her and the *simmering* hot summer afternoon, soon felt like *spring* in June.

Lovers *snuggled*, *ensnared* by her voice *jingling*, *snapping* and *clapping* along to this prima Donna's song, they rejoiced. The little 'wonder' no longer needed to *twiddle* her thumbs and no one would fiddle with her, and who would not want to hear her soft *cooing* against the *shrill boing* of the earlier squad.

It *trickled* down to this; no one would want to give her song a miss.

## Thirsty?

How about a glass of ...

Indulge yourself by plunging into the lovely task of splashing and swirling and swinging and slurping, gurgling and gargling and guzzling down a glass full of ...



## Hungry?

Give your growling stomach a rest and have a steaming, sizzling, steak served fresh from a crackling fire, along with a serving of mashed potatoes that settle on your plate with a loud plop! Squish and Squash your vegetables well and chomp away...



## Gobsnacked?

Did you hear the babies babble and the grannies cackle with laughter at jokes of their own making? Why, I heard them gush about the way the tattletale fell. Now they chatter and they blabber and gaggle and gurgle with laughter and titter with delight... after all it was worth the fight!



## Anger Management?

In anger sometimes, we whine, we grumble,  
we growl...  
We grunt, we scowl, Oh! How we howl,  
For a while we sizzle,  
Hoping the anger would fizzle  
We sputter with rage  
And come face to face  
The boggled, squirming face looks up with  
fear  
Gulping and waiting for it all to disappear

## Onomatopoeic Word List

Bang	Clang	Glimmer	Murmur	Slip	Tangle
Bash	Clap	Glitter	Mutter	Slobber	Thud
Bawl	Clatter	Goey	Plonk	Slosh	Thump
Beep	Clench	Grind	Plop	Slurp	Thundered
Belch	Click	Groan	Pop	Smack	Thwack
Biff	Clink	Groggy	Preen	Smithereens	Tinkle
Blab	Clunk	Groped	Pricked	Snap	Titter
Blah blah	Clutch	Grotty	Quiver	Sneer	Trampling
Blare	Coo	Growl	Ramble	Sneeze	Trickled
Bleat	Crack	Grunted	Rattle	Sniff	Trill
Blurt	Crackle	Gulp	Ribbit	Sniffle	Trip
Bonk	Crash	Gurgle	Rip	Snores	Tumble
Booing	Creak	Gush	Roar	Snuffle	Tweak
Boom	Crinkle	Halt	Rummaging	Sobs	Tweet
Bumbled	Crinkle	Hiccup	Rush	Splash	Twiddled
Bump	Croak	Hit	Rustle	Splat	Twitter
Burble	Crumble	Hollow	Screamed	Split	Wallop
Burp	Crunch	Howl	Screech	Spring	Whack
Buzz	Cuckoo	Hum	Scrubby	Sputtering	Wheeze
Catch	Drag	Humph	Shaky	Squashed	Whipped
Caw	Dull	Hurtle	Shimmering	Squeak	Whirr
Chase	Fizz	Hush	Shot	Squelch	Whistle
Cheep	Fizzle	Jangle	Shredding	Stabbed	Whoop
Cheers	Flash	Jingle	Shrieked	Stammered	Whoosh
Chirp	Flickering	Kick	Shrill	Swarm	Wobbled
Chirrup	Flinched	Knock	Shudder	Swipe	Wow
Chomp	Flop	Moan	Shush	Swish	Yells
Chop	Flutter	Muffle	Sizzle	Swoosh	Yippee
Churn	Giggle	Mumble	Slap	Swung	Zoom
Clamber	Glide	Munch	Slash		



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