

D for derogation?

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I have long wondered if certain sounds correlate with certain sentiments. Do we feel negatively or positively upon hearing certain sounds? Are specific sounds associated with pleasant or unpleasant sentiments?

One thing that seems fairly obvious to me is that most languages, including English and Japanese, employ the “n” sound for negation (itself an “n” word). Examples of course include “no” and “not” in English, and “nai” and “uun” in Japanese. Stepping a little farther afield we quickly find “non” and “ne” in French, “no” in Spanish, “nein” in German and “nyet” in Russian.

This phenomenon may perhaps be explained by pointing out that the “n” sound blocks the speaker’s breath with the tongue, which in fact blocks, at least temporarily, the capacity to connect with the counterpart; thus it could be thought of as refusal or negation. In Chinese we find “m” as in “mei” and “b” as in “bu” for negation, not the “n” sound; these two sounds do have the same effect with respect to the speaker’s capacity to connect, however. The three sounds “n,” “m” and “b” all stop the breath momentarily.

I also notice that the same “n” sound is found in many languages for words that are used as interjections to confirm the speaker’s thinking: “you know” in English, “n’est-ce pas” in French and “no” in Spanish. These sounds or phrases are used from time to time with rising intonation, while speaking, to seek confirmation. The Japanese equivalent is the sentence-particle “ne” (in standard Japanese), with regional variants such as “na” in much of Kansai and “no” in the Hiroshima area.

We can think of these as derived usages based on original “negative” words. It is quite natural to check for understanding by saying “Is it not?” or just “No?” Indeed, in some regional dialects of Japanese we find people using “jan” (obviously short for “ja nai?”) at the end of their sentences for confirmation purposes.

Another hypothesis I’d like to discuss today is that the “d” sound is associated with derogatory or negative perceptions of things. I am inclined toward this hypothesis as I note that Japanese dislikes the “d” sound, especially “da,” as does English, it seems. Let me discuss this more concretely.

In Japanese grammar, when one identifies something as X—i.e. “it is X”—the basic structure is “X da.” For example, *Nihonjin da*. (“They are Japanese.”) However, this sentence, *Nihonjin da*, may sound quite blunt and is avoided most of the time, especially in spoken language.

One way to get around this bluntness is to add a sentence particle, such as *yo* or *wa*, after *da*; *Nihonjin da yo* and *Nihonjin da wa* do not sound blunt. These particles soften the bluntness as well as add a nuance that the speaker is giving new information and fresh recognition, respectively.

Another way to soften is to change *da* into *desu*.

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This is a style shift from direct style into distal style, which creates a certain respectful distance between the speaker and the listener, as well as avoidance of ending with *da*.

Apart from *da* as seen above, Japanese often use *da* or *do* as prefixes to emphasize words in a derogatory fashion, such as *dagashi* (*da*+*kashi*, meaning cheap candies), *dajare* (*da*+*share*, low-grade pun), *daba* (*da*+*ba*, dray horse), *dobusu* (*do*+*busu*, ugly as sin), *doaho* (*do*+*aho*, dense stupidity), *donzoko* (*don*+*soko*, absolute bottom) and so on.

Derogatory or unpleasant words (nouns or adjectives) that begin with the d-sound are countless.

To name a few:

dame: no good

dasai: ugly, unsophisticated

dekunobo: as stupid as a wooden doll

dobu: sewage, drain (a d-word in English, too!)

daji: dolt (another d-word!)

doku: poison

doro: mud

dorobo: thief

The same idea applies to verbs beginning with “d” sounds:

damasu: deceive (yet another English d-word!)

dareru: go slack

darakeru: slack off

detchiageru: make up something, completely fabricate (a story)

Adverbs which employ the “d” sound give rise to unpleasantness, such as:

daradara: doodling (a d-word)

derehere: sloppy

dokadoka: trespassing boldly

doyadoya: forcing one’s way through a crowd

dokudoku: throbbing

dorodoro: muddy

As the Japanese “d” sound is limited to *da*, *de* and *do* (there are neither *di* nor *du* sounds in Japanese), it looks as though English has even more words that have either derogatory (another d-word!) or displeasing (yet another!) connotations.

The prefixes *de-* and *dis-* usually add a negative nuance to words, as seen in: demerit, demote, denounce, discount, discourage, dishonest, disadvantage, displeasure and so on.

Many derogatory words begin with d, such as: damn, dodo, doodle, dum-dum, dimwit and so on. And many words beginning with “d” are rather unpleasant things, such as disgust, drain, death, dread, devil, demon, drug, despair and so on.

On the other hand, sounds which give rise to nice, positive images seem to include the s, k, l, and r sounds. Words like “cool” and “clear,” and names like Claire, Sue or Rebecca seem to present nice images.

I am aware that these samples are far from sufficient to scientifically prove my hypothesis, and there are a good many words which have these sounds and yet carry positive or pleasant feelings as well. Also, to make the hypothesis more meaningful, extensive research would have to be carried out examining all, or most, languages in the world.

Nevertheless, such a hypothesis is intriguing. If I were to live my life again, I would travel all over the world examining languages in this respect. If you happen to be language-oriented, it might be a good theme to work on for your Ph.D.