

## АКТУАЛЬНІ ПИТАННЯ МЕТОДИКИ ВИКЛАДАННЯ ФОНЕТИКИ ІНОЗЕМНОЇ МОВИ

### OCTOLITERAPHILLIA AND H- DROPPING: A STUDY IN ENGLISH PHONOSEMANTICS

**Olga Ilchenko**

*Research and Educational Center for Foreign Languages,  
National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine  
olgilch@hotmail.com*

*The present paper addresses two phonosemantic phenomena associated with the usage of letter “h” in the English language: octoliteraphilia and h-dropping. We argue that both cases are worth teaching as part of English curricula (for intermediate and higher levels) due to their importance in light of language, history and culture interplay. We focus primarily on discussing David Crystal’s discovery of William H Quarto by William Shakespeare that manifests the so-called octoliteraphilia. We also deal with tricky pronunciation cases of h-dropping.*

**Key words:** *phonosemantics, phonaesthesia, h-dropping, octoliteraphilia, the H Quarto, William Shakespeare, David Crystal*

Sound symbolism always sounds intriguing. Any sign is arbitrary, according to Ferdinand de Saussure, the phenomenon termed by him as “l'arbitraire du signe”, but still, who would dare deny the pure beauty of perfect strings of sounds that may (or may not) be words? Meticulously combined and concocted to create ethereal harmony or – at times – aesthetic alchemy? Let’s recall Arthur Rimbaud’s poem “Vowels” (heavily influenced by fellow poet Charles Baudelaire’s concept of “correspondences”) conveying the idea that a color can evoke some mood and/or certain sensory experience:

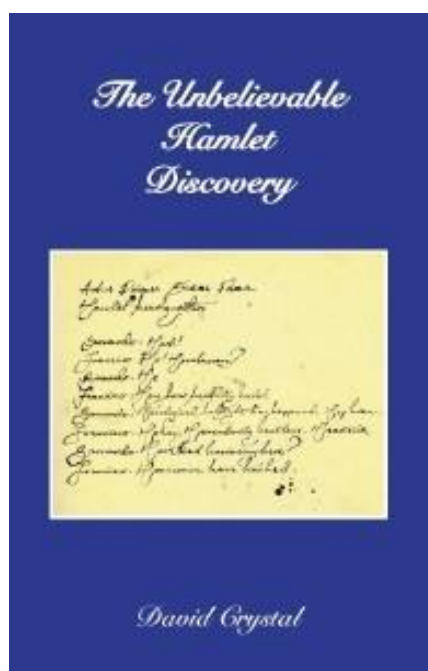
“A Black, E white, I red, U green, O blue: vowels,  
Someday I shall tell of your mysterious births...”

Indeed, over the years, the idea of sound symbolism has visited many bright minds – starting with ancient Greek and Indian scholars, those behind the Viking Runes, and proceeding with Wilhelm von Humboldt (2009), Gerard Genette (1995), Margaret Magnus (2010), to name a few. However, fascination with beauty of the sounds goes beyond the boundaries of euphony/phonaesthetics, or, in terms of David Crystal, “phonaesthesia” or “sound symbolism” (1995).

In this paper, I will touch upon two phonosemantic phenomena associated with the letter “H” in the English language, namely, octoliteraphilia and h-dropping. As we will see, they are interconnected. It should be pointed out that

perhaps the most substantial book on the phenomenon of h-dropping is the one by James Milroy “On the Sociolinguistic History of H-dropping in English” (1983). As to octoliteraphilia, I would like to draw attention to its case in the so-called H Quarto of Hamlet by William Shakespeare. I argue that this incredible story is worth telling in every English language classroom, just because it is a perfect study in history, culture, and the love of the word – everything that makes a language a language, and us – humans.

As such, H Quarto of Hamlet by William Shakespeare is not only an “unbelievable discovery” (Crystal, 2016a), but also a unique phenomenon in the realm of phonosemantics. In the preface to the Quarto, David Crystal quotes Rene Weis who states that “significant local discoveries about Shakespeare can still be made... serendipitous finds of materials relevant to Shakespeare should not be ruled out” (Ibid., p. 1). David Crystal accidentally found the manuscript when he was strolling through the grounds of the house where Shakespeare lived (New House, in Stratford) in a part of the garden rarely visited by the tourists. There, in the broken drain, he found a tiny waterproof bag with the previously unknown quarto edition of Hamlet (known today as “H Quarto”), in which every word began with the letter H. Hence the term “octoliteraphilia” – the love of the letter “H”.



Sadly, the unique manuscript, placed in safe-deposit box in Hatton Garden, London, has mysteriously disappeared later on. Professor Crystal notes: “I uncannily anticipated this when I wrote “By Hook or By Crook”, where I included

a few lines as an example of language play, not realizing that I would have the good fortune to discover a genuine manuscript a couple of years later. The manuscript demonstrates beyond any reasonable doubt that Shakespeare suffered from octoliteraphilia – a loving obsession with the eighth letter of the alphabet... Its most striking feature is the use of many words that were previously thought not to have arrived in English until the 20<sup>th</sup> century... At the same time, the text displays a number of words and phrases incorporated into the play in its later version.” (Crystal, 2007). The H Quarto is indeed a small book – it is only 550 lines long (the final version of “Hamlet” has circa 4000 lines).

Here is an example from the H Quarto, the first lines of the play:

*Actus Primis    Scene Prima*

BARNARDO: Hark!

FRANCISCO: Ho! Henchman?

BARNARDO: He.

FRANCISCO: Hey, hour heedfully heeded.

BARNARDO: Horological halfnight’s happened. Hop home.

Professor Crystal also notes a series of bizarre coincidences: Shakespeare was born in Henley Street, his schoolteacher was Mr Hunt, his uncle’s name was Henry, he married Ann Hathaway, he called his son Hamnet (Crystal, 2016a, pp.5, 7, 9). Interestingly, as the H Quarto has started to be widely recognized in literary and theatrical circles, it was Hardy Cook who organized special roundtable presentation on his “Shaksper list”, with Jonathan Hope, Terence Hawkes and Hildegard Hammerschmidt-Hummel among its participants (Ibid., p.12). Obviously, yet another coincidence. And a case of alliteration, of course. To say nothing of symbolic potential...

On the 7<sup>th</sup> of April, 2016, professor Crystal posted some feedback from scholars on the subject (see his personal website), including that from Professor Keith Johnson: “David Crystal’s Unbelievable Hamlet Discovery hits on heavy and heretofore hidden hints about Hamlet’s history... Crystal’s H Quarto has implications for various areas of Shakespeare scholarship, including the field of Original Pronunciation, in which Crystal himself has been the guiding spirit. He has pointed out that in Early Modern English, an initial “h” was often unpronounced. The first few lines of his H Quarto might then have read:

BARNARDO ’ark!

FRANCISCO ’o! ’enchman?

BARNARDO ’e.

FRANCISCO 'ey, 'our 'eedfully 'eeded.

BARNARDO 'orological 'alfnight's 'appened. 'op 'ome."

Taken as a whole...the H Quarto gives us the longest stretch of uninterrupted h-dropping in the entire canon of English literature, including in the works of Dickens, with all his various Cockney h-droppers. There is, however, more to the h-dropping than phonetic quirk...The hero's name, and the play's title, start with a dropped h, so would have been pronounced 'Amlet. There is, however, a little-known vowel change (known as the "Quite Small Vowel Shift") that took place in just a few streets in Stratford-upon-Avon for a few months in the 1600 period. It is one of the few sound changes in English that took place retrospectively. In it, today's vowel came to be pronounced as the one in "hot". It was not 'Amlet at all, but 'Omlet. The word "omelet" first appeared in the language at around this period, and there is a little-known Elizabethan Cookbook entitled "Chippes Withal". On the topic of omelets the book (written in verse) has this to say: "*Who wolde an omelette make, Perforce must egges brake.*" But this is just what the play previously known as Hamlet is about. In the process of becoming a fulfilled man, Hamlet creates mayhem. In culinary terms, eggs get broken." (Crystal, 2016b). Let us add that this word could be spelled two ways: "omelette" or "omelet", which might be another proof of the case.

For teaching purposes, we suggest drawing attention to the cases of h-dropping in English, such as:

- h-dropping when the word is NOT stressed (so called "weak forms"):
- (h)e, (h)is, (h)im, (h)is; (h)er; (h)ad; (h)ave (e.g. *Let 'im in.*)
- silent "h" at the beginning: e.g. (h)our, (h)eir (h)onour/(h)onor, (h)onest; (an exception to the rule: Hannah);
- final silent "h" in words ending "ah": Hannah, savannah, hallelujah, cheetah; messiah; shah and the like;
- silent "h" in the words: theT(h)ames; T(h)eresa, T(h)ai(land),
- ex(h)austed /ɪg'zɔːstɪd/, exhibition /ˌek.sɪ'brɪʃ.ən/;
- ve(h)icle /'viːəkl/; shep(h)erd;
- Mic(h)ael; tec(h)nology; c(h)emistry; ec(h)o; stomach(h); c(h)orus; sc(h)ool;

- silent “h” in the words starting with “wh”: w(h)o; w(h)y, w(h)at, w(h)en, w(h)ere, w(h)ich; w(h)eel; w(h)ile; w(h)isper; w(h)istle;
- silent “h” in the words words starting with “gh”: g(h)etto; g(h)ost; ag(h)ast; g(h)astly; g(h)ee;
- silent “h” in the words words starting with “rh”: r(h)yme, r(h)ythm; r(h)ubarb.

Two more points are worth noting. The word “herb” (“herbal”) are pronounced with an “h” in British and Australian English; there is silent “h” in American and Canadian English. Also, there is no h-dropping in the words “historic/historical ...”; here, here h-dropping inevitably results in a frequent mistake – employing the article “an” instead of “a”: “an historic/historical...” instead of the correct version: “a historic/historical...”).

It could be concluded that both h-dropping and octoliteraphilia are worth noting – and teaching. Still not incorporated into the Shakespearean Canon, is the H Quarto just a historical happenstance? Hardly. A well-known American poet, writer, editor and literary critic Donald Hall once remarked that – at least in the case of poetry – “redundancy is never redundant” (Hall, 2003, p.50). The ultimate idea behind the phenomena addressed here – the meaningfulness of every linguistic element – proves just that.

### Literature

- Crystal, David (1995). Phonaesthetically Speaking. *English Today* 42.2 (April): 8–12.
- Crystal, D. (2007, April 7). On the H Quarto of Hamlet. *DCblog*.  
<http://david-crystal.blogspot.com/2007/08/on-h-quarto-of-hamlet.html>
- Crystal, D. (2016a). The Unbelievable Hamlet Discovery. Crystal books.
- Crystal, D. (2016b, August 21). Further observations on the Hamlet H Quarto. *DCblog*.  
<http://david-crystal.blogspot.com/2016/04/further-observations-on-hamlet-h-quarto.html>
- Genette, G. (1995). *Mimologics (Stages)*. University of Nebraska Press.
- Hall, D.(2003). *Breakfast Served Any Time All Day: Essays on Poetry New and Selected*. University of Michigan.
- Humboldt, W. von (2009). *Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluß auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts* (Cambridge Library Collection - Linguistics). Cambridge University Press.
- Magnus, M. (2010). *Gods in the Word: Archetypes in the Consonants*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.
- Milroy, J. (1983). On the Sociolinguistic History of H-dropping in English. In: *Current topics in English historical linguistics*. Odense UP.
- Saussure, F. de (2012). *Course in General Linguistics (Classic Reprint)*. Forgotten Books.