

# The Ineluctable Modality of the Audible: Exploring the sound worlds of James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

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Abstract:

*James Joyce's Ulysses takes us into the world of Leopold Bloom; we see through his eyes, hear through his ears and think through his thoughts. We develop an intimate relationship with the interior and exterior world of the man. Through the work Joyce puts the question "Where do we live?" and answers it through making concrete the interdependence of our experiences, inner and outer, which provide our total ecology. This paper explores how Joyce uses word sound to define physical and psychological place, offering the reader a subtle, yet potent, path through Bloom's day.*

*Joyce does this through an acoustic means, namely speech. This is the sound to which humans are most attuned and through which we communicate most clearly. It fills our world inside and out, describing ourselves to ourself and to others. Joyce uses the facets of speech, its sound, its meaning, its understanding, to develop an environment for the reader to inhabit.*

## 1 Introduction

Sound is considered fundamental in most people's lives. The fundamental, and vital, use of sound in our current environment is speech. Speech, and its notation, is the medium through which humans communicate on all levels of experience: we formally transfer information, we express and generate emotional states, and we use it as a method of filtering and organizing our thoughts.

James Joyce's style uses many facets of speech. Reading his works, especially aloud, is to take a tour through many possible uses of speech. Joyce uses language's sounds to imbue a sense of rhythm, place, object and motion in the reader (or more accurately) the listener, giving words many more values than those ascribed to them in dictionaries. In this way Joyce celebrates the prime acoustic world of humans, speech.

In this paper I discuss the development of speech/language, the deriving of meaning from language's sound, and using the sound of language

in a variety of contexts. This is done with references to the early pages of "Ulysses" and to other works of Joyce where appropriate.

## 2 Language as the prime human aural experience

It is commonly accepted knowledge that speech sounds, and therefore language, are a primary force in a child's development after birth. There is an innate desire to learn language and an evolutionary genetic predisposition in the human brain to the learning of language (Lenneberg 1964; in Kies 1991). This is essential in the development of the fully functioning human as we know it.<sup>1</sup>

Daniel Kies (1991) gives an outline, shown below, of language development from ages 0 to 12 months for normal hearing children. These developments show an avid and increasingly active interest by the infant in acquiring language skills. This interest, at such an early, presumably pre-conscious, age, strongly suggests a predisposition to the sound of the human voice, and a further predisposition to deciphering the structures and meanings of the sounds made by that voice.

Age	Vocalization and Communication
Birth	Crying; body movements; facial expressions
12 weeks	Diminished crying; smiles and makes vowel-like, pitch modulated gurgling sound (cooing) when spoken to
16 weeks	Responds to human sounds more definitely; turns head; eyes search for speaker; some occasional chuckling sound
20 weeks	Vowel-like cooing is interspersed with consonant sounds

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<sup>1</sup> This does not presume that heard and spoken languages are the only valid type of language. Deaf people use a very highly evolved language that is similar in most ways to spoken/heard language. Art forms such as dance and theatre also have highly evolved languages that are unique to themselves.

- 6 months** Cooing changing into babbling resembling one syllable utterances; neither vowel nor consonant sound reoccur in any fixed pattern; most common utterances sound like *ma, mu, da,* and *di*
- 8 months** Reduplication (continuous repetition of a syllable) becomes frequent; intonation patterns become distinct; pitch changes in utterances can signal emotion
- 10 months** Vocalization often mixed with sound-play (gurgling, bubble blowing); appears to imitate sounds unsuccessfully; differentiates between words heard
- 12 months** More frequent identical repetition of a sequence of sounds; first words (*mamma, dada*); understands simple commands (*Point to your eyes*)

One most notable aspect of language acquisition is the gap between speech sounds that are used and that are understood. It is obvious to any one who has spent time with pre-lingual children that they understand much more than they can articulate: Kies notes this understanding in a twelve month old.

Kies also notes the predisposition towards the sound structures of words, and their larger counterpart sentences, at the age of eight months. This is seen in the use of intonational structures to signify emotional states. It is in these structures that the most valuable meaning for a dependent child resides.

Making an almost infinite variety of sounds is the function of the vocal tract. This quality allows humans to imitate, often with a fair degree of sonic accuracy, most sounds. If the imitation is not completely accurate it is usually close enough to be understood as symbolic or iconic of the sound. Perhaps it is also this ability that allows so much information, far more than the purely lexical, to be transmitted through vocal sounds.

Joyce demonstrates this in the utterance “Mrkrgnao!” (Joyce, 1922: 57), the sound Bloom’s cat makes greeting him in the morning. Here the cat’s mood is sanguine, confidently assuming she is going to be fed. She repeats this sound as a reminder. When Bloom does not act quickly enough the cat proclaims her displeasure with “Mrkrgnao!” These are quite good notations<sup>2</sup> of the cat’s sounds,

<sup>2</sup> Using the standard alphabetic, not phonetic or phonemic, notation.

and, when attempted, allow the reader to fairly accurately reproduce them.

## 2 Meaning in the sound world.

Joyce’s addition of /r/ to “Mrkrgnao” adds both menace, as a growl, and urgency, with the expulsion of air splitting the two previously adjacent glottals<sup>3</sup>.

Joyce counterpoints these sounds, and their accompanying meanings, later when Bloom asks Molly, his wife, if she wants anything for breakfast, and she replies “Mn” (Joyce, 1922: 58). This utterance is less complex, the constituent nasals, /m./ and /n/, are voiced, and producing the entire utterance requires opening the lips and moving the tongue forward. This action, the relaxing of the jaw and tongue, is one of physical relaxation, implying states of rest, contentment, and in this case, intimacy.

Lexicon Branding Inc., a company that provides names for commodities, explores the relationship between words/speech-sounds and mental states, looking for and exploiting the intuitive understanding we have of word sounds. Lexicon indicates some possible relationships with a very simple experiment, shown below.

“Here's a simple puzzle. Which one of the two nonsense words taketa and naluma do you think goes with each of these pictures?”



If you're like virtually everyone else, you'll pair taketa with the angular illustration and naluma with the curved one”. (Lexicon 2003)

This very simple experiment shows a direct, and mostly subconscious, relationship between the sound and visual world. It also implies a very strong sense of extra-lexical meaning in words. In the case given above it is

“because all the consonants in taketa are what linguists call obstruents, and all the consonants in naluma are sonorants. Obstruents are perceived as harder and

<sup>3</sup> While these phonemes are usually considered velar placing the /r/ sound between the /k/ and /g/ sound forces a glottal action in their production.

more masculine; sonorants as softer and more feminine. Consider the two brand names Clorox, a hard-working laundry product, and Chanel, a perfume, and you'll get the idea.” (Lexicon 2003)

Lexicon’s product, a word and therefore a sound, exists in the market place. As this is a generally unforgiving environment, its research must be pragmatic, has many tangible results, and is largely verifiable.<sup>4</sup> For these reasons branding is a use of sound at its most contrived, and most directed in outcome.

Joseph Gilbert offers another discussion of the relationship we have to speech as a sound.

“The meaning of anything is its effect upon us. Instead of asking, 'What does that word mean?', [ ... ] it would be more accurate to ask, 'What does that word signify?' Vocalizations express how we are affected by our world. Vocal sounds issue forth from emotional states in utterers and establish those states in hearers. Words arise from the intent to refer to things. The first meaning of words is our emotional reactions to their sounds. The second meaning of words, the things they signify, is commonly thought of as being their only meaning.”(Joseph Gilbert, no date given)

Gilbert’s “emotional states” are observed in almost every utterance we express or hear. It is impossible to be involved in a conversation without some underlying assumptions being made about the intentions and signification of the words used. These assumptions are based on an intuitive, unconscious history that is both uniquely personal and culturally universal. When we listen to words we very rarely consciously define their meanings or what they signify.

An example is the word “tree”, which is defined, briefly, as “Perennial plant with single woody self supporting stem or trunk usually unbranched for some distance above ground” (Fowler, 1975). This definition does not address what “tree” may signify: its shade, its potential for exploitation, its the experiential nature of “tree” that is created through the utterance.

To look at the signification of a spoken word is to draw upon and acknowledge another personal and

cultural history that is expressed through the sound of the spoken word. Intonation is by far the most informative signifier in speech. It is what allows us, for example, to divine sarcasm or humour, which influences the immediate value of any utterance.

Roman Jakobson discusses the role of speech as sound signifying more than the lexical meaning in a brief analysis of Edgar Allen Poe’s *The Raven*, paying particular attention to the bird’s utterance “Nevermore”.

“[The] expression's value is not entirely accounted for in terms of its purely semantic value [...]. Poe himself tells us that it was the potential onomatopoeic quality of the sounds of the word *nevermore* which suggested to him its association with the croaking of a raven, and which was even the inspiration for the whole poem. Also, although the poet has no wish to weaken the sameness, the monotony, of the refrain, and while he repeatedly introduces it in the same way ('Quoth the raven, “Nevermore” ') it is nevertheless certain that variation of its phonic qualities, such as modulation of tone, stress and cadence, the detailed articulation of the sounds and of the groups of sounds, that such variations allow the emotive value of the word to be quantitatively and qualitatively varied in all kinds of ways. “

Jacobson goes on to describe the elegance and potency of the word, ascribing a wealth of information to it.

“The utterance of Poe's refrain involves only a very small number of articulatory [... or] vibratory motions ... for the word to be heard. In short, only minimal phonic means are required in order to express and communicate a wealth of conceptual, emotive and aesthetic content.”

This diverse and intricate wealth is seen throughout Joyce’s writing. Bettina Knapp (1988) describes Joyce's use of the emotional content of particular phonemes in his short story *Eveline*. She looks upon the work as an auditory experience, to be read aloud, ascribing particular meanings to the sound of particular phonemes.

The experience of the character Eveline is “accentuated by [Joyce's] complex [musical] system of figures of speech and by his use of stressed and

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<sup>4</sup> The power of brand naming is seen in the immediate increase in sales of the British company French Connection clothing company when it decided to use the initials of French Connection United Kingdom as its logo. This is a visual as well as a sonic example

unstressed phonemes of beguiling sonority” (Knapp, 88). An example of this system can be seen in the sentence: “Eveline sat at the window watching the evening invade the avenue.” Knapp sees this phrase as employing very careful use of alliteration: “Eveline”, “evening”, “invade” and “avenue” are used to encase “window” and “watching”.

Knapp contrasts the *w*, to which she ascribes “an airy, breezy quality, indicative of the need to move about”, with the *v*, to which she ascribes opposite qualities.

According to Knapp the relationships of phoneme to mood are context based and used by Joyce to support the unfolding sentiments of the story: first of squalor, then of hope, dreams and expectation, and finally a return to hopelessness, the status quo for the protagonist Eveline. The sentence “The man out of the last house passed on his way home; she heard his footsteps clacking along the concrete pavement and afterwards crunching along the cinder path before the new red houses” (Joyce, 1983) reveals more alliteration and onomatopoeia: the sounds “clacking”, “concrete” and “crunching” contribute a harsh, aggressive and dissatisfied atmosphere, including the reader in the oppressiveness of Eveline’s situation.

Knapp suggests emotional meaning for many phonemes. These include: /h /as being harsh and violent; /t/ as being free flowing; /o/ and /oo/ as being reminiscent of the past; /cr/ as choking; /d/ as harsh, cold and jarring. These meanings are attributed to the physical and physiological production of the phonemes. For example:

*h* is produced by opening and closing the glottis. When closing the glottis the air stream is abruptly cut, giving a sense of violence, also the expulsion of air can reinforce this sense of violence;

*d* is voiced and produced by the tongue releasing an explosion of air, this could create the harsh, jarring effect Knapp alludes to;

*cr* sounds like the utterance one makes when choking and therefore may momentarily create that sensation in the listener and speaker.

While Knapp’s theories are highly subjective and open to argument it is difficult to deny that certain speech sounds elicit certain emotions in listeners and speakers alike. Knapp believes Joyce deliberately used particular sounds in this way, reinforcing the readers’ experience of the story.

### 3 Bloom’s acoustic world

One of the striking uses of sound in Joyce’s work after *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* is the way he signifies speech. This is done by simply

putting a dash before the spoken words; for example from page 264 of *Ulysses*:

He pitched a broad coin down. Coin rang.  
-Hold on, said Lenehan, till I ...  
-Fortune, he wished, lifting the bubbled ale.  
-Sceptre will win in a canter, he said.  
-I plunged a bit, said Boylan winking and drinking. Not on my own, you know.  
Fancy of a friend of mine. (Joyce, 1922)

By doing this, we are not given the luxury of easily defining characters from their thoughts or their actions. Joyce also rarely describes the nature of his characters utterances, mealy using, “he said” to signify speech.

Blurring the defining lines between the characters, their actions, the narrative and Bloom’s/Joyce’s descriptions and internal thoughts, forces the reader/listener to consider all aspects of the story, the interior and exterior more equally than is done through typical methods. This creates a mood in which exterior acoustic, heard, world is blended with the unheard interior world and both are listened to equally.

Listening to the sound world Joyce creates is similar to listening to any other sound world. It creates an emotional, visceral response. Or, as Michael Heumann (98), referring to Walter Ong, relates:

“sound is an *interior* phenomenon: “Whereas sight situates the observer outside what he views, at a distance, sound pours into the hearer.” While vision directs one outside the body, hearing enables one to “gather sound simultaneously from every direction at once: I am at the center of my auditory world, which envelops me, establishing me at a kind of core of sensation and existence”

This is the position Leopold Bloom holds in *Ulysses*. He is the centre in all respects, physically, intellectually, emotionally and metaphorically. When he is not noted as such it is Stephen Dedalus who holds that position. And it is Joyce, through Dedalus, who draws our attention to the sound world.

“Stephen closed his eyes to hear his boots crush crackling wrack and shells. You are walking through it howsoever. I am, a stride at a time. A very short space of time through a very short time of space, Five

Six: the *nacheinander*<sup>5</sup>. Exactly: and that is the ineluctable modality of the audible” (Joyce 1922: 42)

The use of alliteration, onomatopoeia, rhyme and rhythm in this short segment lends credence to Knapp’s, Jacobson’s and Gilbert’s theories. Joyce obviously emphasises the sound of Stephen walking over the shells through onomatopoeia, and the rhythm of the step through alliteration.

Joyce/Dedalus continues:

“Rhythm begins, you see. I hear. A catalectic tetrameter of iambs marching. No, agallop: *deline the mare*.”

Open your eyes now. I will. ...” (Joyce 1922: 43)

In these short paragraphs Joyce/Dedalus makes a striking semantic return. He does this using an acoustic pointer. The sentence “**I am**, a stride at a time” is sonically returned to with “A catalectic tetrameter of **iambs** marching”. When exploring the lexical, dictionary, meaning of these words we see that Stephen’s vigorous “stride at a time” is faltering. Joyce however counterpoints this semantic stumble with the vigour of his alliteration, that is, his sound.

This simple use of sound provides an example of the possible dichotomies between the intellectual, lexical meaning of speech and the extra-lexical/intellectual meanings with which the listener can be imbued.

Joyce also uses aspects of speech sound to signify place, be that a physical, intellectual or emotional place. An example of using speech sound to signify a move from an internal personal place to a more public place through the use of assonance and rhythm is:

“National school. Meade’s yard. The hazard. Only two there now. Nodding. Full as a tick. Too much bone in their skulls. The other trotting around with a fare. An hour ago I was passing there. The jarvies raised their hats.

A pointmans back straightened itself uprightly suddenly against a tramway standard by Mr Bloom’s window.” (Joyce 196: 93)

In the first paragraph Joyce places us in Bloom’s interior world as much through the use of

rhythm and rhyme as through the meanings contained in the words.

In the first sentence of the second paragraph Joyce jars us from Bloom’s reverie by fracturing the pentameter and rhyme scheme created towards the end of the first paragraph and by introducing both a new sound, the nasal diphthong /oi/<sup>6</sup>, and a completely new rhythm. In this sentence the reader runs out of breath and is forced to use new articulatory processes, causing a mental and physical shift in him or her self.

Using the quite simple devices of alliteration and rhythm Joyce flags the positional shift we make as readers from Bloom’s interior mental world to his physical exterior world.

An example of Joyce segmenting the rhythmic flow of Bloom’s day, and the reader’s apprehension of it, is seen in pages 174 to 176 where Bloom describes fantasies, or memories, of eating that gradually metamorphose into fantasies, or memories, of sex.

He does this by using very short, usually unformed or incomplete sentences that build in jerky rhythmic intensity, until Joyce inserts the short paragraph

“Stuck on the pane two flies buzzed, stuck.”

jerking the reader from Bloom’s reverie into the physical space with a sentence structured to imprison the two protagonists.

After this perhaps unwelcome interruption Bloom leaps back into his thoughts with a renewed vigour until the climax

“Hot I kissed her. She kissed me. I was kissed. All yielding she tossed my hair. Kissed, she kissed me.  
Me. And me now.  
Stuck , the flies buzzed.”

Then, after a more relaxed and individual musing Bloom is reminded of, and returned to, the corporeal through a “quiet message from his bladder”.

In this sequence Joyce uses the /s/ sound in “kissed” and “tossed” as a release form the closed sound of the /k/ and /t/. The /s/ is articulated without any obstruction, which opposes the obstruents /k/ and /t/. Here Joyce offers a metaphor to the release described in the text.

This release is countered by the /u/ and /k/ sounds in “stuck”, that emphasise the stuck nature of the flies and perhaps of Bloom. Here the sounds are

<sup>5</sup> This translates as: one after another or [one after] the other (Peter Terrell et al 1980)

<sup>6</sup> Phonetic script is not used here due to concerns in publishing.

produced in the throat or to the back of the mouth and have as a feature a blocking or closing of the vocal tract. In this way the sound and its articulation reinforces the lexical meaning of the utterance and the overall, larger meanings implied in the text.

## Conclusion

It may well be said that the sound of speech is less relevant than the lexical meaning alluded to in words, but there is enough anecdotal evidence and literature on that topic to question that proposition. That the sound of speech works on less conscious levels places it in the same context as other sounds. It can be considered the same as music, the sound of the natural environment, and the sound of the 'unnatural' environment. Joyce draws our attention to this fact early in the book through lines such as

“Stephen closed his eyes to hear his boots  
crush crackling wrack and shells.”

where first he tells us to close our eyes, drawing our attention to the acoustic world, and then uses onomatopoeia to emphasise the natural sounds of the environment.

Joyce demonstrates an extremely fine sense of the potency of sound expressed through speech in *Ulysses*. This is seen in the few examples given above and in the literature on the subject.

This paper does not address many other important aspects of *Ulysses*, such as the relationship to Homer's work or the variety of structural and stylistic approaches Joyce takes. Instead it looks exclusively at the sound worlds created in *Ulysses* developing a sense of the power of the sound of words, a most important part of the acoustic world.

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