

Miszellen | Onomatopoeia in Comics. On the A-Human Theatre of Expression in Graphic Representations

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When we think about comics, graphic novels or even just Japanese manga, big, pointy words – like *pow*, *swoosh* and *sob* – come to mind. These *onomatopoeia*, also known in German as *bang words* (*Peng-Wörter*), augment the emotions felt by the characters and depict the intensity of the character's state or the situation in general. Pop artists such as Roy Lichtenstein have also been known to use big comic book fonts; Brigitte Bardot sings about them in Serge Gainsbourg's music video *Comic Strip*. So, even people who are not entirely familiar with the comic genre have experienced their share of comic moments and references. In graphic works, these letters or semi-words usually appear accompanying an extreme movement or an emphasized action (such as a punch, a gust of wind or crying). Without these striking words, comic frames would remain blank, punches would become less powerful and tears less touching. In this contribution, I would like to examine to which extent these semi-words or letters do not just bear a notion of meaning, be it semantic or emotional, but are also able to grasp human expression in a theatrical mode of writing.

Let us at first examine the strategies of written language and onomatopoetic mechanisms that relate to human or anthropomorphic expression and emotion in comics. My focus will be on American comics by Marvel and DC Comics. Though there are differences between different comic forms (such as comic books, comic strips, graphic novels and manga), within the framework of this article, my concern will be more of a general idea that refers to all forms within the genre.

The comic medium deals with two inherent aspects simultaneously: the graphic aspect of the drawn picture and the written aspect of narration and dialogue within and along the storyline. Like other media, there are specific guidelines and conventions within the comic genre. To give a quick example: When you read a superhero comic and Batman's speech bubble says, "Good morning people!", the frame of the speech bubble indicates direct speech. The task of the speech bubble is to give the comic character a voice and to enable dialogue between the characters, thus allowing the reader to follow their respective thoughts and opinions. It is by means of this mechanism that comic books are able to achieve great intimacy, as they enable a direct connection with the character without the somewhat inconvenient third-person narration – "...he screamed" or "...she thought" – that comes with storytelling or narration.

Written language in a comic is found at different points within the work. I would like to provide a brief overview of the different possibilities: Firstly, *information boxes* are often found at the beginning of a new chapter, telling us where we are and what the situation is, i.e. the place, some background or some context. The text in information boxes is usually somewhat impersonal and clear – *neutral*, so to speak. Secondly, *dialogue* can be found

in speech and thought bubbles within the frames, and is customized to the character – each character can have a different font or sometimes colour, and that palette will be fixed throughout the character's dialogue, with changes emphasizing meaning (bold or italics etc. emphasizing a different state of emotion or speech). The speech bubbles themselves also have different designs to underline the meaning of the phrases they contain. A speech bubble might have spikes if a character is shouting angrily or a dashed line to indicate whispering. In some cases, narration bubbles may appear along the panels, providing the direct dialogue with additional information or a narrative perspective. Finally, another option relates to the use of *names and titles* within the scenery, such as book titles on a book covers or signs on storefronts, direction signs above highways etc. The names of towns or the titles of books are, with some exceptions, simply eponymous and informative.

Onomatopoetic expressions differ from other forms of written language in this medium as they manifest a graphic position as a carrier of meaning or narration. Onomatopoetic texts usually appear outside the framed dialogue bubble, beside the character or floating within the scenery. They have a more distinct graphic design, emitting another sphere or layer of expression, such as the sound created by the character (or by their body) or an object that is not necessarily controlled by that character or object (i.e. a cough, the screech of tires, gunshot etc.). These onomatopoetic expressions appear when the characters themselves are not able to capture this live expression or, as I would put it, human emotion and expression.

The expressions I would like to talk about are comic-specific words that are interconnected with our cultural vocabulary. Due to their unique graphic design, they become medium-specific and therefore may be the first link or association that come to mind when we think about the genre of comics. As Martin Schüwer states, “[...] in the public perception of the comic as a medium, *onomatopoetic* expressions enjoy an exorbitant status.”

Though lots of comics use onomatopoetic expressions (for example, a wide range of superhero comics), there are many that refrain from using them (for example *The Arrival* by Shaun Tan and *Marvels Tangled Web: Severance Package*). And even the works that do use them often only do so when there is a peak in the dramaturgy of the storyline. For example, when Superman fights Doomsday and they exchange punches and laser gazes; or when Peter Parker alias Spiderman cries over the loss of his uncle Ben. Fewer onomatopoetic expressions are used in comic scenes where, for example, the plot begins and the circumstances are explained. We can distinguish between four different kinds of onomatopoetic expression that can be found in comics:

1. simple sound words that represent extra-linguistic phenomena, such as *boink* or *splash*;
2. simple inflectives such as *sigh* or *cough*;
3. mixed forms of one and two that are both inflectives and onomatopoetic sound words, such as *rumble* or *screech*; and

4. simple interjections in the sense of non-word-based interjections or sounds made using the vocal chords, such as *ooohhh!*

The use of onomatopoeia must be viewed with regard to the rest of the written language in the panel and keeping the other panels around it still in mind, as they can influence each other and their meaning is usually constituted across the panels.

Written language is one component of the picture and, in spite of its graphic appearance, bears semantic meaning, whereas onomatopoeia go beyond the semantic aspect borne by written language, trying to capture a character's emotional outburst within the panel, using a succession of letters. But while it captures emotions, it creates a form of expression that we would not (usually) use in real-life dialogue or to describe such occurrences or feelings. There are, of course, exceptions, expressions such as *shazam* or *hm*, that may already be found or heard in certain slang. *Emojis (emoticons)* or certain expressions in online chat platforms may be seen as originating from onomatopoeia, but these still differ from use in comics, as they assume an illustrative role to the written language on the smartphone or on the internet. But overall, comic characters and real-life people have two different ways of articulating their uncontrollable emotions. Therefore, I would argue that while the content of speech bubbles or information boxes resemble human expressions that can be found elsewhere, onomatopoeia work with a-human expressions, expressions that are only used to capture the human expression in the comic medium. I would also argue that onomatopoetic expressions are used to create another representation of human beings, generating and utilizing a unique language and specific set of rules.

Onomatopoeia, especially successions of letters, try to capture the sound of the human and its surroundings, working not with the semantic meaning of a word but with its sensory and *synesthetic* features. Onomatopoetic semi-words often create a synesthetic perception independent of graphic design, which gives the reader an understanding of the actions, sounds and/or emotions that can be observed while reading. Such onomatopoetic words, which reproduce and illustrate the sounds of the surroundings, complete the picture – with tires screeching, puddles splashing and guns going off with a *bang*. Schüwer quotes from *E.J. Havlic's Lexicon of Onomatopoeitics*: "Every onomatopoetic expression is a rough copy of an acoustic reality." Moreover, punctuation and additional lines can help to describe the expression in detail or even intensify the synesthetic perception of the expression. Punctuation, such as exclamation points, question marks or the frequently observed *dot-dot-dot* arrangement, has sound-specific connotations, such as volume, tempo, pitch and the pronunciation of onomatopoetic expressions.

So, surprisingly, even in what should have been a mute medium, acoustic attributes of sound can be found in comics. Moreover, this medium manages to convey acoustic aspects as something visual: Onomatopoetic expressions such as *sob*, *murmur* or *crash* are received together with their semantic linguistic codes, while – due to their lack of semantic meaning – onomatopoetic expressions such as *ieeeehehh*, *argh* and *yuck* are received more in terms of their graphic aspects and the distinct design of the succession

of letters. Letters are received as a linear chain, whereas the typeface of onomatopoetic expressions is received simultaneously, embedded in the overall graphic structure. But we should keep in mind that fonts in comics cannot really become 'neutral', as fonts and graphic design are one essential aspect of the composition within this medium.

So, to what extent does the reader hear with his or her eyes and is able to come closer to the character and their trials and tribulations? And is the human aspect of a comic character exclusively captured through (written) sound? Because comics aim for a synesthetic effect, they are viewed in their entirety (regarding both graphics, graphic design, the use of color, use of written language, font etc.) and read sequentially. But within this linearity, the reader may perceive the very same character in two contrasting expressions of emotions on the same page: calm and angry, not crying and bursting out in tears etc. This is to say: We see these two emotional stages simultaneously on the same page. What we see here is a movement in standstill and we have the possibility to read and re-read it and to observe different states simultaneously.

The writer Kevin Smith and the artist Phil Hester seem to have fallen in love with onomatopoeia, as they are the creators of the supervillain Onomatopoeia who fights *Batman* and Green Arrow in DC Comics. Though he might be at risk of being read as a one-dimensional villain, *Onomatopoeia* chooses to replace human communication with purely onomatopoetic language. Even if it now seem like onomatopoeia are a-human in the sense of the criminal, a closer look at the medium of the comic book suggests that onomatopoeia are an a-human addition to language proper in comics, which refers to nothing less than the a-human theater in language as such.

1. Schüwer, Martin: "Laute malen: zum Status der Schrift im Comics", in: Pietrini, Daniela (ed.): *Die Sprache(n) der Comics*. Munich 2012, pp. 15-32, here p. 31. ↑.
2. Ibid., p. 29. ↑.
3. Cf. Hetser, Phil/Smith, Kevin: *Green Arrow* 3:12 (2002). ↑.