

The
Atlantic

How to Snore in Korean

The mystery of onomatopoeia around the world



Jason Lee / Reuters

URI FRIEDMAN | NOV 27, 2015 | GLOBAL

Consider the dog.

He exists [the world over](#), in various forms and sizes, but his signature sound doesn't translate all that well.

In Swedish, the sound of a small dog barking is rendered as *bjäbb-bjäbb*; in Turkish, *hev hev*; in Japanese, *kian kian*. Imagine a somewhat larger dog, and the words change yet again: to *vov-vov*, *hauv hauv*, and *wan wan*, respectively. Americans might say a small dog goes *arf arf* and a medium-sized dog *ruff ruff*.

Granted, a Swedish Vallhund is not an Anatolian Shepherd or a Japanese Spitz. But variations in dog breeds can't fully account for these differences (for what it's worth, you can find Swedish Vallhunds [in Oklahoma](#)). Instead, they speak to a larger phenomenon: Words formed from a sound and intended to imitate that sound—what linguists refer to as onomatopoeia—fluctuate around the world even when the underlying sound is roughly the same in each place. Sometimes there's remarkable consistency across these words (most cows go something like *moo*) and sometimes there are curious outliers (America's exceptional *gobble gobble* for a turkey). Other times it's a free-for all; witness the [grunting pig](#), which goes *knor knor*, *oink*, *groin groin*, and *hrgu-hrgu* as he trots around the world.

And the thing about it is, we don't really understand why this fluctuation occurs. It has something to do with the alchemy of humans in different times and places striving to mimic noises in the world around them, and to incorporate this mimicry into distinct linguistic systems and cultural contexts. But what exactly?

RELATED STORY



Why 'Mom' and 'Dad' Sound So Similar in So Many Languages

“No rigorous studies have been done” on comparing onomatopoeia across cultures, Derek Abbott of the University of Adelaide in Australia told me by email. “Academics like me are still at the rudimentary ‘stamp collecting’ phase where I am making a collection of sounds.”

Some have hypothesized over the years that language originated with the imitation of natural sounds—a notion sometimes referred to as the “[bow-wow theory](#).” But whatever the answer to this question, onomatopoeia explains only a sliver of the words we use. As John McWhorter [recently wrote](#) at *The Atlantic*, “No theory will ever account for why the words in a sentence like ‘He couldn’t even get halfway over that wall!’ are the way they are. Language is too changeable to allow us that pleasure, standing as we are at the end of a possibly 150,000-year timeline since human speech began.”

By day, Abbott is a professor of biomedical engineering. But for fun, in the course of his travels, he has amassed a [giant spreadsheet of animal sounds](#) in different languages (from which the examples above are drawn). He thinks of the words he compiles as “what would be written in the text balloon coming from the mouth of an animal” in a comic book.

Four years ago, Ke Nguyen, a video editor in London, took a different tack by consulting friends and volunteers recruited through Gumtree, a Craigslist-like site in the U.K. The result was this delightful video. (Onomatopoeia junkies beware: Judging from the video’s comments section, the Canadian and Brazilian participants may not have gotten all their animal sounds right.)



Bow Wow Meow - Animal Sounds in Different Languages

from [Ke Nguyen](#)

04:14

James Chapman, an illustrator who just completed a Ph.D. at the University of Manchester, has embraced the mystery in all this. First [on Tumblr](#), and now in a [recently released book](#) funded through Kickstarter, he has spent a couple years chronicling onomatopoeia around the world, glorying not in explanation, but in variation. Plus, it’s illustrated.





James Chapman

It's an unlikely project for Chapman to undertake. His Ph.D. is in physics, not linguistics. And he doesn't speak any foreign languages ("I speak dog in other languages," he offers). He told me he got interested in the subject after visiting a friend in South Korea, where he was baffled to learn that dogs there say *mung-mung*.

HOW TO SNEEZE IN SIX LANGUAGES





James Chapman

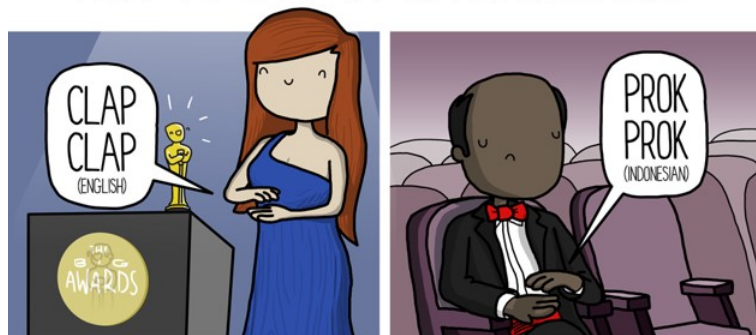
A bit of trivia here: The name of the ravenous main character in the game Pac-Man is based on *paku paku*, the Japanese word for the sound of eating.



James Chapman

Chapman pointed out that what looks like variation in onomatopoeia is sometimes simply a rearranging of discrete sounds: *clap clap* in English becomes *plec plec* in Portuguese.

HOW TO CLAP IN SIX LANGUAGES





James Chapman

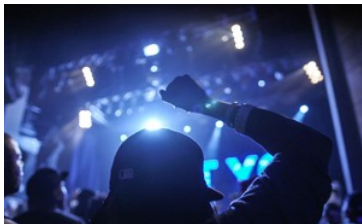
I asked Chapman whether his research had led him in any bizarre directions.

He recalled one sprawling Google search for the duck sound in Estonian. “I ended up coming across one [video] that was a man chasing a duck and making the duck sound in Estonian, and I thought, ‘This is a very strange video.’ It had, like, three views.”

“That was a life-questioning moment,” he added.

Thankfully for us all, he persisted. Oh, and that duck? In Estonia, it goes *prääks*.

LATEST VIDEO



Keeping Go-Go Going in a Gentrifying D.C.

Anwan “Big G” Glover fights to keep the musical beat of the city alive.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



URI FRIEDMAN is a senior editor at The Atlantic, where he oversees the Global section. He was previously the deputy managing editor at Foreign Policy.

[Twitter](#) [Email](#)