

# Having a nose for what a word means from its sound

Peter  
Trudgill



email: [newsdesk@archant.co.uk](mailto:newsdesk@archant.co.uk)



■ Words like snarl, sneeze, sniff, snigger and snuffle all seem to have a connection with the nose.

Most EDP readers probably don't know what the old Norfolk dialect word 'snurle' means. I had never heard of it myself until I came across it in John Greaves Nall's *Glossary of the Dialect and Provincialisms of East Anglia*, which was originally published in 1866. But it is an interesting fact about the English language that you might perhaps be able to have a stab at guessing something of what it means from how the word sounds.

Vowels and consonants usually have no meanings of their own. We can put them together to make words which do mean something, like house, or to make grammatical bits of words which linguists call "morphemes", like the -es in houses, which means 'more than one'. But sounds like 'e' and 's' don't have any meaning on their own.

There is also generally no connection between how a word sounds and what it means – the link is totally arbitrary. There is no reason why, as Shakespeare implied, a rose should be called a rose, or why a dwile should be called a dwile. A book can equally well be called a llyfr (Welsh) or a

vivlio (Greek) or ksi ka (Polish). The word mark means 'mark' in English, 'marrow' in German, and 'worm' in Norwegian.

However, sometimes we come across combinations of sounds in English which do seem to have some kind of significance of their own. Think about words like lump, bump, dump, thump, jump, crump. Doesn't it seem as if these -ump words all have something, rather heavy, in common? And what about glare, gleam, glimmer, glint, glisten, glitter, gloss, glow? The gl- combination in these words seems to indicate something to do with being shiny.

Linguists call this "sound symbolism".

Maybe "-ump" does have a rather heavy sound to it. But there doesn't seem to be any obvious reason why gl- should have anything to do with luminescence – in English, it just does.

So this gives us our clue about snurle. Think of words like snarl, sneer, sneeze, snicker, sniff, snuffle, snigger, snitch, snivel, snob, snooty, snooze, snore, snort, snout, snuff, and snuffle. It's not too far fetched, I think, to say that they all seem to have some connection with the nose. So it's not too much of a surprise to find that in Norfolk snurle as a noun means 'a cold in the head' and, as a verb, 'to talk through the nose'.