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Quechua texts of perception

JANIS B. NUCKOLLS

Introduction

Recent work by anthropologists, folklorists, and semioticians has made significant strides in our understanding of the dynamics and poetics of spoken utterances. Such work has been motivated, generally, by the goal of understanding verbal expression in terms of its own unique structures and expressive modalities. The following paper will contribute to this line of inquiry. It offers an analysis of a form of expression, sound symbolism, that is widely used by people whose languages have not been written down. The main advantage of this analysis is that it rescues sound symbolism from the irrational abyss into which it has often been consigned. It also illuminates one of the ways in which language can be said to share properties with other systems of signs (Jakobson 1960: 351). I will argue that linguistic sound symbolism is used by Quechua speaking people in eastern Ecuador to create a type of concreteness and imageability that is functionally analogous to visual modes of expression. Sound symbolic performances simulate the unfolding of an action, event, or process. Because of their formal, stylistic, and semiotic distinctiveness, sound symbolic performances are detachable from their discursive surroundings as texts of perception. The discursive functions of sound symbolic texts can best be understood by using terminology from film and video technique. My argument will be based on analyses of statements made by Quechua speakers when asked about the meanings of sound symbolic words. I conclude by suggesting connections between Quechua speakers' use of sound symbolic language and their ecological, aesthetic, and phenomenological orientations.

Linguistic sound symbolism has been identified in many language families. Sound symbolic words have been referred to variously as 'ideo-phones' (Newman 1968; Samarin 1970; Jakobson and Waugh 1979), 'onomatopoeic words' (Feld 1982), and 'expressives' (Diffloth 1972, 1976). All of these terms, including my preferred term 'sound symbolism',
are problematic in specific respects. However, all of them refer to a form of expression that is deliberately and consciously imitative or iconic of auditory, rhythmic, visual, or psychophysical sensations. Linguistic sound symbolism is an imitative way of expressively communicating the salient sounds, rhythms, visual images, and psychophysical sensations that are drawn from perceptions of the environment and bodily experience. For speakers of English and other European languages, the term 'sound symbolism' refers primarily to the use of linguistic sounds to imitate natural sounds. Examples from English are 'click' the sound of hanging up a telephone and 'thwack' the sound of a forceful impact. For speakers of English, sound symbolism is largely onomatopoeic, or sound imitative, and is associated with qualities such as childishness, whimsy, and simplicity, that make it inappropriate for many discursive contexts. The inappropriateness of sound symbolic discourse for most speakers of English, I suggest, can be related to discursive values that have been influenced by a cultural ideal of literacy. For Euro-Americans, literacy is intimately linked with the communication of knowledge and the transmission of high humanistic culture. Literacy implies a conjunction of ideals that clash with the values associated with sound symbolic expression.

Ong has articulated the ideals of Western literacy quite well. What has been crucial to the development of a culture of literacy, according to Ong, has been an ideal of truth that is detached and impersonal. Ong considers the importance of detached truth to have been reinforced by the development of Learned Latin. Learned Latin was particularly well suited for the communication of detached truths because it was spoken outside of familial contexts. It was therefore more insulated from affective connotations and so more congenial to the communication of abstract logic. Related to the importance of abstract, detached truth is its transmission in an appropriate medium. According to Ong, the development of a non-pictographic writing system was important for the communication of abstract, detached truth. He states: 'The alphabet, though it probably derives from pictograms, has lost all connection with things as things' (1982: 91). I raise the issue of writing systems here because other scholars have commented on the disadvantages of pictographic writing systems. Putting aside the fact that the term 'pictographic' is lacking in analytic rigor (cf. Sampson 1985: 26–45), I mention these comments because they reflect a certain ideology about images in general. This ideology, moreover, is linked with our ideas about iconicity as a semiotic mode. Hockett, for example, once argued for the superiority of arbitrariness over iconicity by setting up an equation between iconicity and 'picture writing' on the one hand, and arbitrariness and 'true writing' on the other (1958: 578). Literacy as a cultural ideal, then, depends upon a concept of detached
truth. Detached truths were nurtured with a specialized code, Learned Latin, which was reserved for contexts of scholastic discourse and thereby insulated from affective influences. Moreover, the form of our literacy is intimately linked with the form we think our knowledge should take. Detached truths should be fixed and transmitted with abstract, nonpictorial symbols. For Euro-Americans, then, literacy represents values that are linked with a particular kind of code suitable for our form of knowledge. However, it is not only the form of our knowledge which is related to literacy, but our very conceptions of language itself. I refer specifically to the principle of the arbitrariness of the sign and its frequent juxtaposition against the semiotic principle of iconicity. Iconicity, it has often been stated, is a limited semiotic mode. The linguistic symbol has to be arbitrary, it is argued, because iconicity is essentially imitative and therefore limited. Such forms of argumentation obscure the fact that all signs communicate in mixed modes. A sign such as an onomatopoeic word may create an impression of resemblance, but it is also a conventional form (cf. Peirce 1955: 105; Eco 1979: 191–217).

Given the ideal values that underlie our culture of literacy, it is not difficult to understand why sound symbolic expression has often been conceptualized as a kind of foil for literate language. Many scholars have commented on the expressivity and emotivity of sound symbolism (cf. Diffloth 1972; Samarin 1991). Related to its emotive, expressive aspect, sound symbolic language is also concerned with the portrayal of ‘all one hears or sees, and in general, all one perceives’ (Levy-Bruhl 1926: 165). Its concern with perceptual description has also implicated sound symbolic language use in paradigms of primitive mentality (Levy-Bruhl 1926: 147). Sound symbolic language further deviates from literate standards of detached truth because it communicates by imitation or iconicity, rather than by arbitrariness. According to this line of reasoning, conventional or arbitrary symbols are more conducive to the communication of abstract, detached truth than iconic symbols because their mere conventionality implies a distance between what is said and the means used to express it. The ideals of Western literacy and the qualities of sound symbolic linguistic expression can also be opposed within a developmental framework. In fact, the iconicity of sound symbolic language is consonant with an evolutionary view of language which considers iconicity to be phylogenetically earlier than arbitrary or symbolic communication (cf. Hockett 1960).

The semiotic significance of sound symbolic expression

Quechua speakers’ use of sound symbolic utterances reveals that they have an overwhelmingly aesthetic interest in their ordinary perceptions.
Their prolific use of sound symbolic discourse suggests that they do not share our scientifically based distinction between objective, truthful perceptions and vivid aesthetic perceptions. It is because sound symbolic utterances communicate imitatively, or iconically, that they are appropriate both for aesthetic expressivity and objective, explicit description. An iconic visual sign, such as a photograph of a person, is precise and explicit because it establishes a direct connection between itself and the person it represents (Peirce 1955: 105). This direct connection is constituted by a perceived resemblance between the sign vehicle (i.e., the photograph) and the object (i.e., the person). Iconic signs are also expressive, however, because they share their objects’ sensory qualities. A photograph of a person, particularly one which focuses on facial features, does more than simply provide an objective representation of that person. It also expresses something about that person’s affective qualities. In the same way, sound symbolic words are linguistic icons which communicate information that is simultaneously explicit and expressive. It is because they are both explicit and expressive that sound symbolic words function as complex signs with multiple functions.

To clarify the basis for asserting that Quechua speakers use sound symbolism to describe a perception that is both objectively truthful and aesthetically vivid, it is necessary to refer to the concept of performance. Performance is a mode of communication which ‘calls forth special attention to and heightened awareness of both the act of expression and the performer’ (Bauman 1986: 3). Quechua speakers often use sound symbolic forms in highly foregrounded moments of performance. Such foregrounding is evidenced by repetition, reduplication, and other kinds of intonational elaboration. When they are so foregrounded, sound symbolic words constitute a subtype of performance that can occur within larger stretches of performed discourse. Bauman’s conception of the qualities that define performance is quite congenial with the nature of sound symbolic discourse.

I understand performance as a mode of communication, a way of speaking, the essence of which resides in the assumption of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative skill, highlighting the way in which communication is carried out above and beyond its referential content. … It is also offered for the enhancement of experience, through the present appreciation of the intrinsic qualities of the act of expression itself. (1986: 3)

Quechua speakers’ use of sound symbolism is highly sensitive to the way communication is carried out. Sound symbolism communicates through the enhancement of one’s experience of the intrinsic qualities of expres-
sion. Sound symbolic language by its very nature calls attention to itself as distinctive from its surrounding discourse. There is a different semantic feeling surrounding a sound symbolic utterance. It is this difference which caused Diffloth to remark that sound symbolic words 'are indeed a totally different kind of linguistic animal' (1976: 251). Sound symbolic utterances, therefore, are particularly well suited for a performative mode of expression.

The iconicity and performativity of sound symbolic utterances endow them with a particular semiotic status. An iconically performative statement is semiotically distinctive from an assertative or referential statement. A prototypical assertion states something about an event, process, or action (Lyons 1983: 726) and is therefore grounded in the distinction made by Jakobson (1971) between a speech event (E$_s$) and a narrated event (E$_n$). However, sound symbolic performances communicate not by referring, but by iconically simulating the most salient features of an action, event, or process. When a Quechua speaker engages in a sound symbolic performance he or she is asking a listener to participate in imagining the action, event, or process being simulated. The distinction between a speech event and a narrated event is therefore collapsed in sound symbolic performance. The speech event becomes the narrated event and vice versa. This collapsing of the distinction between a speech event and a narrated event allows sound symbolic performances to communicate in a manner that is both explicit and expressive. Sound symbolic performances are explicit because they simulate the salient qualities of an action, event, or process. These simulations are expressive because they are achieved through the enhancement of one's experience of the intrinsic qualities of expression. For Quechua speakers, then, sound symbolic performances simulate perceptions that are at once objectively truthful and aesthetically vivid.

Because of the configuration of properties that characterize sound symbolic utterances, their function in discourse cannot be understood by comparison with the function of referential statements. Their iconic and performative properties give sound symbolic utterances a unique discursive function. A speaker's performative foregrounding of a sound symbolic form simulates the salient qualities of an action, event or process, and thereby invites a listener to project into an experience. Such projections, in effect, create a particular kind of interlocutionary involvement. As used by sociolinguists (Chafe 1982; Tannen 1982b, 1989), the term 'involvement' refers to a style of speaking and an attitudinal alignment or footing (Goffman 1979) that is more involved in a communicative interaction than focused on message content. However, the interlocutionary involvement created by sound symbolic utterances allows a form of
communication that is simultaneously affective and involved as well as precise and explicit. The involvement created by sound symbolic utterances points a listener to a more complex awareness of what is being communicated. This more complex awareness, then, leads a listener to deeper kinds of imaginative, intellectual, and emotional understanding (Nuckolls 1992).

The iconic, performative, and involvement properties that characterize sound symbolic discourse establish a special interpretive frame which can best be understood with terminology borrowed from cinematic and videographic communication. Sound symbolic utterances communicate imitatively, as do the images of video and cinema. By their performativity, sound symbolic utterances simulate the salient qualities of an action as it unfolds in time. Again, videographic and cinematic images are comparable insofar as they also present images of actions unfolding in time. Finally, the interlocutionary involvement created by sound symbolic utterances, is also created by video and cinema. Kristeva has characterized the quality of involvement created by cinema as follows (1989: 315):

> cinema calls for the subject to project himself into what he sees; it is not presented as an evoking of a past reality, but as a fiction the subject is in the process of living. The reason for the impression of imaginary reality that cinema elicits has been seen in the possibility of representing movement, time, the narrative, etc.

Throughout this article I will use terms such as ‘close-up shot’, ‘wide angle shot’, ‘juxtaposition’, ‘montage’, ‘fast motion shot’, and ‘slow motion shot’ to describe some of the discursive functions of sound symbolic use.

Quechua speakers’ language use, then, is motivated by a concern for concreteness and imageability, and for the aesthetic dimensions of their ordinary perceptions. However, it is the way in which they create concreteness and imageability that is distinctive from the conversational practices of Euro-American cultures. Quechua speakers’ use of sound symbolic discourse creates concreteness and imageability by imitating the experientially objective and aesthetic qualities of their perceptions. Sound symbolic communication is achieved through performative imitations that enhance one’s experience of the intrinsic qualities of expression. Sound symbolically expressed performances collapse the distinction between a speech event and a narrated event. For sound symbolic interlocutors, the speech event becomes the narrated event, rather than a mere reference to it. Interlocutors’ involvement in sound symbolic performances directs them to a more complex awareness of what is being communicated. This more complex awareness, then, leads a listener to
deeper kinds of imaginative, intellectual, and emotional understanding. The imitative, performative, and involvement properties that characterize sound symbolic discourse establish a special interpretive frame that is analogous to visual modes of expression such as cinema and video. The following section will present a brief sketch of the Pastaza Quechua speaking people whose sound symbolic language is then analyzed.

The Pastaza Quechua

The data for this research were collected among Quechua speakers in the Pastaza region of Ecuador. This region begins roughly at the foothills of the Andean chain and extends eastward through the lowland rainforest. The village where I conducted most of my fieldwork, Puka Yaku, is close to the easternmost frontier of Ecuador, which borders Peru. Although it has been influenced by forces of modernization, Puka Yaku is in most respects the very antithesis of an urban center. As is true of most villages in this part of Ecuador, Puka Yaku cannot be reached by roads. It is located at the place where the Puka Yaku river joins the much larger Bobonaza river. The Bobonaza, which flows from northwest to southeast, provides the major axis of directional orientation. This river is also the major arena or stage for observation and display. Whenever a canoe glides past, its inhabitants are greeted, questioned, and after they’ve passed by, discussed. It is the most public possible place for a Puka Yakuan. Puka Yaku is not readily distinguishable as a village by its spatial arrangement. In fact it owes much of its sense of separateness and organization to the Dominican administration of the Catholic church. The church building itself is more or less the center of Puka Yaku. There is also a sort of nebulous plaza-like area adjacent to the church which is used by children to play soccer. But this area does not stand out as a center because people do not build their houses around it. Most houses in Puka Yaku are scattered away from the church and plaza, and situated along the river, or along the numerous footpaths leading to and from agricultural fields.

Puka Yakuans sustain themselves by hunting, fishing, and slash and burn agriculture. Their participation in the cash economy is only sporadic. Most adults in Puka Yaku cannot read or write. Besides the fact that there is only scattered facility for reading and writing, there is only a very limited understanding of Spanish. There is an open space which is used as a classroom in Puka Yaku, but it is difficult to find teachers willing to live for any length of time in a village without plumbing, electricity, or adequate medical care. Moreover, some families are unwill-
ing to spare their children's valuable help in daily subsistence activities. There is an attitude in Puka Yaku which does not acknowledge literacy as a highly valuable skill. As there are plans to build roads through the eastern region of Ecuador, this attitude will undoubtedly change.

**Metalinguistic explanations of sound symbolic use**

The semiotic distinctiveness of sound symbolic utterances is evident in Quechua speakers' reflections and explanations of their own sound symbolic use. These explanations and commentary reveal that sound symbolic discourse provides Quechua speakers with another form of reflexivity. This form of reflexivity can be characterized as 'imageic'. The word 'imageic' should not be understood in its narrowly visual denotation, but in a wider sense that includes all perceptual domains. In this article, 'imageic' refers to a mode of perception and communication that depends on structures, the meanings of which are evident in themselves. A simpler way of saying this is to adopt Friedrich’s statement that images 'stand for themselves' (1991: 27). In Pastaza Quechua, sound symbolic words are generally imageic insofar as they stand for themselves. However, they also manifest specific formal and semantic qualities that lend themselves to imageability. Sound symbolic words are semantically image-like insofar as they always concern vivid and relatively clear perceptions of various kinds. They are also imageic because speakers use sound symbolic words to establish a figure and ground within a sentence. Sound symbolic words are comparable to images or figures against a background when they are performatively foregrounded by repetition, unusual lengthening of a syllable, or higher pitched pronunciation over part or all of a sound symbolic word. Furthermore, their performative foregrounding is often used in conjunction with syntactic foregrounding. Syntactic foregrounding is achieved when a sound symbolic adverb is used to stand for an entire proposition that is self-evidently meaningful.

The imageic qualities of sound symbolic words make most sense with respect to their discourse function, by analogy with terminology from cinematic and videographic technique, including close-up shots, wide-angle shots, slow motion filming, and juxtapositions or montages of images. Just as a cinematographer presents viewers with a simulated reality by means of certain techniques, Quechua speakers use sound symbolic discourse to present their listeners with performative simulations of movement, duration, sound, etc. The essential difference between a sound symbolic performance of an action, event, or process and a reference to it can be characterized as follows. When an action is referred to, it is independent of any particular time frame. It can be referred to in
the past, ongoing present, or future. A sound symbolic performance of an action, event, or process, however, is always immediately present. Just as a cinematically portrayed event has to be present for its viewer, a sound symbolic performance is always understood to be taking place in a simulation of real time and space.

The cinematically imageic properties of sound symbolic discourse are evident in the following attempts to explain their meanings. If the meanings of sound symbolic images are self-evident, as any image by definition should be, then people should try to explain them by simply repeating the sound symbolic utterance in question. On the other hand, sound symbolic words are also linguistic forms, and one of the design features of language is that it is reflexive and can be used to refer to itself. The data reveal both tendencies. When asked, people repeated their sound symbolic performances in order to explain them, and they also reflected on these words by paraphrasing and elaboration of the situational contexts of their use. The following data include responses from six women who are identified by the capital letters A, C, E, F, J, and M as a shorthand for their first names. My questions and comments are always indicated by the letter N.

The first example is taken from an account of a child’s disappearance. Speaker E uses the sound symbolic word ding to describe a sudden start that she felt when she realized that her child was missing. She performatively foregrounds her perception by pronouncing ding in a way that is variously louder, more forceful, higher pitched, or more drawn out. Speaker E’s use of ding below is analogous to a cinematic close-up shot.

1) E: Ima shina rasha chari ding yarirani wawata — WHAT PERHAPS WAS I DOING (THAT CAUSED ME TO), DZING REMEMBER (MY) CHILD?
2) N: ['ding']
3) E: Nda ding mi yuyarirani, ‘wawagaya?’ Luzawra nirani ‘Hah? Kaybi mawra — YES, IT WAS A DZING THAT MADE ME SAY TO ROSA ELENA ‘WHAT ABOUT THE CHILD?’ ‘HAH? (SHE ANSWERED ME) HE WAS RIGHT HERE —’
4) N: DZING YUYARIUNGI? HOW ARE YOU THINKING ‘DING’?
Speaker E’s explanation makes it obvious that the word *dzing* stands for itself. Each time I questioned her about its meaning, she repeated *dzing* to explain it. By performatively foregrounding her pronunciation of *dzing* from the rest of the explanation, she simulates the feeling of the word itself. Her simulation is imitative of her experience, because it is the way this feeling stands out from her ordinary state of mind that makes it distinctive. *Dzing* gives the listener a closer, more focused look at the defining feature of a psychophysical sensation, and for this reason it is comparable to a close-up shot in a film. *Dzing* presents the listener with a close-up shot of a sensation by performatively imitating the foregroundedness and distinctiveness of speaker E’s realization. The foregrounded quality of the realization is performatively expressed by speaker E’s consistent use of a higher intonation when pronouncing *dzing*, which sets it off from its surrounding utterances.

The next example is taken from a transcript of an interview. I was asking speaker E about sound symbolic words I’d heard other people use and trying to elicit their meaning. My question concerns the use of the adverb *sa*, which describes any expanded or random movement from a center. In this context it is used to describe the movement of newly hatched turtles away from their nest. I had heard someone else say this particular sentence, and I was interested in how she might evaluate it. As so often happened when I asked such questions, my friend judged it as good, but then re-articulated the sentence, and in the process, explained to me its meaning. Speaker E’s use of *sa* below is best understood by analogy with a cinematic wide angle shot.

In my first question, line 1, I used multiple repetitions of *sa*, as I'd heard someone else do, to mimic the spatial scattering of the hatchlings. In lines 2 and 4 speaker E rearticulated my sentence by imposing an upwardly gliding pitch contour over one pronunciation of *sa*. By gliding the pitch of *sa* upward, speaker E engages in a moment of performance. The performative upglide over *sa* extends her own voice pitch, thereby imitating the extent of the hatchlings’ movement throughout a space. The performative description of this movement is expressive because it highlights the intrinsic qualities of the sound symbolic word *sa*. However this performative description is also intended by speaker E to be an intonationally explicit simulation of a visual pattern. Because it describes the spatial extendedness of a process of dispersion, *sa* is comparable, in its function, to the use of a wide-angle shot. Wide-angle shots typically give viewers a vast and expansive view of a scene. This is, relatively speaking, an expansive view because it presents a pattern from a distant, human perspective rather than from the perspective of the turtle hatchlings.

The next example is taken from a myth. It uses several sound symbolic adverbs, but the particular adverb I was asking about was speaker M’s multiple repetitions of *pa*. Speaker M uses *pa* to describe the flapping of a condor’s wings as it flies away. Speaker M’s use of *pa* below is analogous to a cinematic portrayal of an action because it simulates the experience of watching something appear to grow smaller as it moves farther away through space.

3

1) M: Chuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu! \(p^b\)aa pa pa pa misha chay\(l^a\)y k\(h^i_i_i_i_i_i\)ichusha rishka
CHUUUUUUUUUUUUUUU (THEY SHRIEKED)! (AND THEN) P^H AA PA PA PA, (THE CONDOR) WENT OFF, ABANDONING THE BABY MISHA HAWKS RIGHT THERE K^III

2) N: ['Pa pa pa' imata? PA PA PA, WHAT IS THAT?

3) M: Nda, p^aa pa pa pa pa pa pa pawasha rig, kuti mandzhariracha. YES, FLYING P^H AA PA PA PA PA PA PA PA, IT WENT OFF BECAUSE IT WAS FRIGHTENED.

In line 3 of her explanation speaker M supplies the verb pawasha ‘flying’, making clear that the sound symbolic adverb is simulating the action described by this verb. She presents an image of the birds’ flying away by a moment of performance consisting of multiple repetitions of pa. However, the rhythm of her repetitions is not uniform. In both lines 1 and 3, the first few syllables of pa are more forceful and are pronounced separately, while the last few are not as forceful, are more rapid, and diminish in their intensity. She is using her repetitions of pa, then, to heighten the temporal and spatial unfolding of the action. The flapping begins more forcefully and then seems to fade in intensity as the birds themselves become more distant in space. By diminishing the force of her repetitions, speaker M simulates the experience of watching something appear to grow smaller as it moves away from a fixed vantage point. This is unlike a characteristically discursive rendition of an action, which simply refers to its occurrence. Rather, it is analogous to a cinematic portrayal because it simulates one’s awareness of the way an action unfolds through space and time.

Example 4 is taken from an informal conversation with speaker A. I was asking her to evaluate a particular sound symbolic adverb/verb combination. She recognized it as possible, and illustrated its meaning by using the adverb itself in her explanation, and also by elaborating the contextual features of its use. Speaker A uses kaw below to simulate the sound of walking through dried leaves. Her use of kaw is cinematically imageic because it attempts to recreate, and involve the listener in, a direct, synaesthetic experience of sound, movement, and rhythm.

Example 4

4

1) N: Ima shinata kaw kaw kaw aytangi?
   HOW CAN YOU STOMP (GOING) KAW KAW KAW?

2) A: Aytanchi nukanchiga —
   We stomp —

3) N: [kaw kaw kaw
   (going) KAW KAW KAW
4) A: kaw kaw kawga ... biranoy! Birano indil'a ag an?
GOING KAW KAW KAW ... IN THE SUMMER! IN SUMMER THERE'S ONLY THE
SUN, RIGHT? (i.e., no rain)
5) N: ah ow.
UM HM.
6) A: Chasnay panga kaloka gustuta uyarin kʰaw kʰaw kʰaw kʰaw kʰaw kʰaw.
Chiwimi kaw kaw uyarin.
LIKE THAT IN THE (DRIED) LEAF MAT IT SOUNDS NICE: kʰAW kʰAW kʰAW
kʰAW kʰAW kʰAW. WITH THAT IT SOUNDS kaw kaw.

Speaker A's repetitions of kaw create concreteness and imageability by
simulating the experience of walking through dried leaves. Her multiple
repetitions of kaw simulate an experience of time marked by a rhythmically
steady movement through space. By aspirating and devoicing kaw
in line 6, speaker A heightens one's awareness of the most salient sound
qualities that punctuate the experience of walking. Because this descrip-
tion as a whole simulates an experience of sound, movement, and time,
it is analogous to a cinematic portrayal. This particular example also
illustrates the difference between a performative simulation of kaw and
a non-performative reference to it. When it undergoes multiple repetition,
aspiration, and devoicing in line 6 kaw performatively simulates move-
ment, time, and sound. When it is repeated only twice in the same line,
however, the simulated event is referred to rather than presented.

The next example is taken from a description of an extremely dramatic
event. Speaker E is relating how her uncle, a shaman, was shot and killed
by some members of a neighboring tribe. The story is particularly wrench-
ing because her uncle saw these men coming and thought they were
planning to spend the afternoon visiting with him. But as soon as they
arrived they opened fire on him, and my friend described in vivid detail
the firing of the rifles and the hitting of their target. The sound symbolic
adverb tay simulates the sound of the rifles firing, and of bullets whizzing
through the air. Ton then simulates the sound of the bullets hitting the
target, the shaman's body. Speaker E's use of tay and ton can be compared
to a cinematographer's use of juxtaposition and montage and also to the
use of a slow motion shot to freeze time and slow the action described
for dramatic effect.

5

1) E: Tʰaaaaaay tʰaaaay tʰay! Ay Janel'ya uyangi ma yanga tʰaaaay tʰaay
ton ton ton ton ton ton ton
TʰAAAAAY TʰAAAAAY TʰAAAAY OH JANET, YOU WOULD HEAR (THEM) JUST
TʰAAAAAY TʰAAAAAY TʰAAAAAY TʰAAAAY TʰAAAAAY TʰAAAAAY TʰAAAAAY TʰAAAAAY TʰAAAAAY TʰAAAAAY!
2) N: rayu?
THUNDER?
3) E: I'llapa! Na runa aychay hapishkaga hiridzata uyarig ashka: tooon ton tooon ton toooon ton toon! Ay dyus miu!

RIFLES!! (WHEN BULLETS) CATCH HUMAN FLESH IT SOUNDS (SO) UGLILY: tooon ton tooon ton toooon ton toon! OH MY GOD!

4) J: [Ah ow chasna man.]
   [AH HAH, THAT'S HOW IT IS.]

In line 1, there is a montage of sound images. I define the word 'montage' following Eisenstein's general definition (1942: 3–65), which considers it any juxtaposition of cinematic images that creates a new thematic unity, or meaning. Speaker E juxtaposes a sound image of gunfire with a sound image of ammunition meeting a target to create a new synthesis of meaning: a man's body being riddled with bullets. She begins by presenting a highly foregrounded performance of the sound of the rifles firing. She draws out her pronunciations of the adverb tay, saying faaaaaay in order to simulate the unfolding of that sound in real time. Then she interjects a vocative 'oh Janet!' and presents a more elaborated montage of images. This montage is formed by repeating the same adverb tay, the sound of the rifles firing and then 'splicing' onto it the sound image of the bullets hitting her uncle's body: 'tthaaaay tthaaaay ton ton ton ton ton ton ton ton'. The second part of this montage, the repetitions of ton, occur in a rapid stressed/unstressed rhythm to imitate the rapid, intermittent thud-like sound of the ammunition hitting the shaman's body. In line 3 she remarks on the ugliness of this sound image, and then slows down the pace of her repetitions. This is comparable to the way a film director might present a slow motion shot. The action itself seems to last longer, which heightens the drama of that particular moment: 'tooon ton toon ton toooon ton toooon'. At the same time that she is remarking on the ugliness of the sound image, speaker J, who happened to be sitting with us, affirms the accuracy of the description by commenting 'ah hah that's how it is!'

The final example below is taken from an interview with speaker E. I was asking her about sound symbolic adverbs used to describe digging and making holes in the ground, and mentioned an utterance I'd heard in another context. She repeated my utterance but then recreated her own example with a specific context, using repetitions of the sound symbolic adverb ling, which simulate a series of insertions into the ground. Her repetitions of ling can be understood by comparison with a kind of montage technique which allows an editor to present the complete span of an activity, by juxtaposing segments of it. Each segment of the activity is then understood by a film audience as progressively leading to the activity's conclusion.
6

1) N: Ima shinata uktun uktun uktun al’angi?
HOW DO YOU DIG UKTUN UKTUN UKTUN?

2) E: Uktun uktun uktun al’anchi palanda mal’kita tarpungaw; uktushal’ya churanchi, na na kasna, chishi, chishi awg shina, na las cuatro shinayga, chunga uktuta shina al’ashun; kayandiga uktunaga ling ling ling ling tarpug shamushun chi uktuyga. Chi man
WE DIG UKTUN UKTUN UKTUN TO PLANT PLANTAIN SAPLINGS; MAKING HOLES WE DIG, NOW LIKE THIS, IN THE AFTERNOON, AS IF IT’S ABOUT FOUR O’CLOCK, WE’LL DIG TEN HOLES; THE NEXT DAY WE’LL COME TO

ling ling ling ling PLANT IN THOSE HOLES LING LING LING LING; that’s what making holes is about.

In the preceding example 5, a juxtaposition or montage of sound symbolic images was used to create a new synthesis of meaning. A sound image of rifles firing and a sound image of bullets hitting a body were ‘spliced’ together to simulate a man’s body being riddled with bullets. In example 6, by contrast, juxtaposed repetitions of ling, each in progressively higher pitch, are used to simulate the time spanned by the activity of planting plantain saplings. When film editors want to present the complete span of an activity or process, they juxtapose a series of shots, each representing a subevent of that process or activity. Such juxtapositions allow editors to abstract from the entire activity or process, and present only some of its component subevents before presenting the activity’s completion or result. In an analogous fashion, speaker E simulates, through repetition and progressively higher pitch, a presentation of the complete span of the activity of planting. Each repetition of ling is understood to describe a component subevent of the planting process. The final, highest pitched repetition of ling marks the completion of this process of planting, just as the final shot in a series of juxtaposed cinematic images represents the final achievement of whatever activity is portrayed.

Summary

What all of these explanations have demonstrated is that Quechua speakers can be quite articulate about their use of sound symbolic images. All of these explanations demonstrate that people were able to reflect on
their use of these words by paraphrasing them. Yet, it was equally important for them to define these words by treating them as self-evident images. This was accomplished through performative simulations which highlighted the intrinsic qualities of the words as sound shapes. One might very well ask at this point, of what importance are the sounds, rhythms, and visual patterns of sound symbolic words? Why, if it's possible to describe these actions, events, and processes with ordinary verbs, do Quechua speakers rely so much on sound symbolism? After all, several of the explanations made use of a particular verb to paraphrase a sound symbolic adverb. The verb *pawana* 'to fly' was used to paraphrase *pa*. The verb *yuyarina* 'to remember' was used to paraphrase the meaning of *dzing*. The verb *ipapana* 'to fire a rifle' was used to explain *tʰay*, and the verb *tarpuna* 'to plant' was used to paraphrase the meaning of *ling*.

One possible explanation is that sound symbolic words are expressive, and their verbs are referential. This has been the position advocated by Diffloth (1972: 441), who describes the difference between sound symbolic words and other classes of words as a difference between 'expressive' meaning and 'cognitive' meaning. However, such a binary division of semantic functions introduces a slew of theoretical problems and questions. For example, why is expressivity not also cognitive? This kind of distinction contributes to the misunderstanding that sound symbolic words are instinctive, pre-linguistic, and pre-rational. This is not Diffloth's point of view (cf. Diffloth 1980: 58). However, his analytical distinction between 'expressive' and 'cognitive' says more about our own culture's tendency to dichotomize facts and values than it does about Quechua speakers' way of looking at things. Moreover, how can there be utterances that are nonexpressive? Even the seemingly barest referential statements are tinged by social, cultural, and personal meaning (cf. Goffman 1983: 120). The word 'expressive' undermines the varied uses Quechua speakers make of sound symbolic forms because it prevents one from considering that sound symbolism may represent a nondiscursive form of truth.

Although there is not enough space to discuss this issue adequately, I present one example which illustrates a relatively nonelaborated, nonperformative use of sound symbolism. The following example is taken from a discussion about techniques for repairing pottery. Speaker C is adopting a pessimistic view and stating that when clay jars break apart in a certain way, they have to be thrown out. Speaker F is advocating repair. In order to verify that speaker F understands a particular situation in the same way she does, speaker C uses two sound symbolic adverbs, *taw* and *ing*. She uses *taw* to imitate a sound made by a clay jar when it explodes during firing. She uses *ing* to describe an image of the jar's fissuring as a result of the explosion:
1) C: chasnatas ichug mag ani, mancha nukanchi — kayta pakishka, imata, ichug maranchi
I THROW SOMETHING LIKE THAT OUT, (DON'T) WE .. IF IT'S BROKEN HERE, WHAT ELSE COULD WE DO? WE WOULD HAVE TOSSED IT OUT.

2) F: [chasnama hambig ashkawnara THEY WOULD HAVE REPAIRED SOMETHING LIKE THAT.

3) C: Kay ima taw tuvyasha, kuti manachu ing ra?
IF IT BURSTS APART HERE TAW, WELL, ISN'T IT TRUE THAT IT THEN GOES (I.E., SPLITS) ING?

4) F: ah ow UM HM.

5) C: ichug\(\acute{p}\)a manchi WE CAN ONLY TOSS IT OUT.

This example makes evident the fact that sound symbolic words can be important for the exchange of information and the verification of understanding. Speaker C uses \textit{taw} to describe a certain quality of a sound which is heard when jars burst apart. The image of its fissuring is described with \textit{ing}. Neither sound symbolic adverb is performatively foregrounded in this example, but both of them can be, and frequently are in other contexts.

I suggest, then, that sound symbolic words provide Quechua speakers with another form of reflexivity. They give people another way of considering an action, event, or process. This reflexivity is performative in mode and imageic in its discourse function. Sometimes the imageic quality of a sound symbolic word presents one with a closer look at the defining feature of an action, event, or process. This is comparable to a close-up shot in a film, as in example 1, of the mother suddenly realizing that her child was missing by using the adverb \textit{dzing}. In other instances, however, a wide-angle view of an event may be more interesting or dramatic than a close-up shot. This is the case with example 2, of the sound symbolic adverb \textit{sa}, which portrays an extended view of a scattered pattern. In this example, the adverb \textit{sa} portrays the centrifugal movement of newly hatched turtles leaving their nest. \textit{Sa} works like a wide-angle shot because it portrays a pattern which can only be seen from a distant, human perspective, rather than from the perspective of the action's participants. In many contexts sound symbolic words may be used to create a heightened awareness of the three- and four-dimensional properties of an action, as do cinematic and videographic media. The repetitions of \textit{kaw} which portray the sound of walking through dried leaves imitate a regular, steady rhythm that defines one's movement through space. The repetitions of \textit{pa} that imitate the birds' wings flapping as they fly away create
an image of movement which is at first forceful and then fading in intensity as the birds move farther and farther away. The repetitions of tay and ton juxtapose two sound images of the same event, a man’s death by gunfire. The narrator imitates her experience of these sounds by portraying the continuousness of the exploding gunfire and the interrupted quality of the ammunition hitting her uncle’s body. However, when she is prompted by my question to explain what these sounds portray, she slows down their temporal unfolding, as if to present me with a slow motion image of the sounds. All of these sound symbolic presentations are reflexive, communicative acts (Bauman and Briggs 1990: 73) rather than instinctive, pre-linguistic utterances.

The comparison of sound symbolic functions with cinematic techniques is not very radical if one considers that much of discourse analysis relies upon metaphors of image. Consider, for example, the concepts of focus, framing, and foregrounding. Recent work on the content of verbal discourse has shown, moreover, that interlocutionary involvement is often created by means of verbal images (Tannen 1989: 134–166). The notion that images can arise from linear series of abstract two-dimensional symbols is fundamental to theories of literature, poetics, and discourse analysis. Images and imagery are an important aspect of all kinds of spoken and written language: ‘What makes the image trope pervasive is its relation to mimesis and description, and there is no sharp line between (1) a visual image trope (2) an effective description and (3) any old description’ (Friedrich 1991: 29). Even logical propositions have been compared with images: ‘A proposition is a picture of a structure — the structure of a state of affairs’ (Langer 1976: 68).

Images, then, are fundamental to our ways of speaking as well as our ways of thinking about speaking. However, most work that refers to images and image-like notions is at bottom concerned with a conceptual two-dimensionality. Concepts such as focus, frame, picture, and foreground are all compatible with a two-dimensional representation such as that of a prototypically literate message reproduced on a flat surface with written symbols. My analysis is novel only insofar as it extends the two-dimensional notions of focus, frame, picture, and foreground into a simulation of real space and time. Sound symbolic language is not designed for convenient reproduction into a literate two-dimensional form. This is because the meanings of sound symbolic words often depend upon performative features such as intonational rises, distinctive rhythms, syllabic extensions, and pitch variations, none of which are conveniently representable with traditional orthographic conventions. Speakers use these performative features to imitate the perceptual outlines of a particular time and space. Sound symbolic performances are interactional in
their design. They are meant to be experienced by people who are sharing the same perceptual field. I compare their discursive functions to film and video techniques because these media are also imitative, and they are also designed to simulate co-presence in time and space by their presentations of images, movements, and sounds. The comparison between sound symbolic language use and visual media has the advantage, moreover, that it makes sense of the varied ways speakers use it. Just as audiovisual images can be used to share information, to verify understandings, and to evoke or express emotional points of view, so too can sound symbolic images.

The imitative basis of sound symbolic imagery is perhaps the biggest obstacle to recognizing its essential reflexivity. The very word ‘imitation’ implies a lack of originality or, even more negatively, an attempt to deceive by counterfeit. A very different perspective on imitation is advocated by Tannen (1987, 1989), who has argued that imitation is a basic drive which underlies not only much of our creative activity, but our very processes of learning. Aristotle would have agreed. The following excerpt from chapter 4 of *Poetics* reveals that he considered imitation to be a manifestation of a characteristically human and universal mode of thought:

> Imitation is natural to man from childhood, one of his advantages over the lower animals being this, that he is the most imitative creature in the world, and learns at first by imitation. And it is also natural for all to delight in works of imitation. The truth of this second point is shown by experience: though the objects themselves may be painful to see, we delight to view the most realistic representations of them in art, the forms for example of the lowest animals and of dead bodies. The explanation is to be found in a further fact: to be learning something is the greatest of pleasures not only to the philosopher but also to the rest of mankind, however small their capacity for it; the reason for the delight in seeing the picture is that one is at the same time learning — gathering the meaning of things. ... (1984: 2318)

This brief passage reveals Aristotle’s belief that one learns by the process of imitation, and also that one learns by observing what is imitated.

**Conclusion**

I conclude this paper with some tentative thoughts on the origin and development of sound symbolism in natural languages. Perhaps onomatopoeic sound symbolism has always existed in all languages. If I am correct then its function might be understood by reference to its particular form
of reflexivity. One aspect of this reflexivity that has not yet been discussed is that it allows speakers to imitate and thereby *fix* their perceptions and observations. There are two reasons for making this assertion. First of all, there is a formulaic aspect involved in using sound symbolic words appropriately. This is why many sound symbolic adverbs are always paraphrased with a particular verb. Besides their formulaic quality, however, there is another sense in which sound symbolic words fix one’s perceptions. This second sense has to do with their sound qualities and the ways in which speakers make use of these qualities. This second type of fixity can best be understood by reference to the fixed quality of visual signs.

To understand this fixed quality, it is useful to refer to Jakobson (1971), where he speculated on the essential differences between visual and auditory signs. He characterizes the essential difference as follows. Visual signs, such as representational paintings, tend to be reified, imitative, and spatial in their organization. Auditory signs such as language and music, by contrast, are hierarchically organized, and composed of discrete components that are organized by their temporal succession. But the crucial difference, according to Jakobson, is this: when a painting is synthesized by a viewer, its entire composition remains intact. However, when an utterance is synthesized, its phonemes vanish into larger structures of meaning (1971: 344). Jakobson’s essential point, then, is that visual signs have a fixed quality, while verbal signs are evanescent. Although sound symbolic words are expressed in a verbal medium, they are characterizable by many of the qualities Jakobson attributed to visual signs, including the most important quality of fixity. A sound symbolic performance is fixed insofar as it is not subsumed into larger structures of meaning. It is meaningful by itself, and as itself — a whole that cannot be decomposed further into recurrent partials of contrastive elements. The sounds of a sound symbolic utterance do not *fade* into larger structures of meaning. They are their own meaning. They have a quality of coherence, or textuality (cf. Hanks 1989: 96) that renders them detachable from their discursive surroundings. They are fixed in a performative simulation of time and space.

The development of writing systems and print, and their unrestricted use, have given some cultures a more permanent and also a more standardized method for fixing their perceptions and observations. Writing has also catalyzed a certain way of thinking involving abstract codification, formal logic, and elaborate systematization and classification (Goody 1977). Moreover, writing and print have made possible certain specialized technologies for imitation and fixation. These specialized technologies are considered by Ong to be forms of ‘secondary orality’ (1982).
They encompass media such as photography, film, video, and magnetic sound tape. This proliferation of media has resulted in a decrease in the functional importance of sound symbolic language for Euro-American linguistic cultures. Nevertheless, it continues to be used occasionally by many literate speakers, although its function has been transformed from reflexive to ornamental. Among people who have not been enculturated into literacy, however, sound symbolism continues to be used prodigiously, and for a variety of discursive functions. Pastaza Quechua speakers' use of sound symbolic language, then, has a functional significance for them similar to our own culture's use of imitative technologies.

For speakers of Pastaza Quechua, sound symbolic utterances attempt to capture the 'what' of everyday experience. However, this is not as simple as it might sound. Quechua speakers are unfamiliar with attitudes based in scientific materialism, which have been trained to consider the world of observable phenomena apart from any moral or aesthetic values. They are not, in other words, schooled in our scientific outlook, which considers the universe as a configuration of indifferent and amoral forces (cf. Redfield 1953: 108). Quechua speakers do not view the natural world as something with strictly physical qualities. Their portrayals of sounds, rhythms, images, and shapes represent not simply the fact of a perception, but the most aesthetically salient qualities of that perception. The aesthetic qualities of sound symbolic utterances in turn lend themselves to a number of discursive functions. They are used to report, to emote, to humor, to explain, to tease, to emphasize, to frighten, to instruct, and to infer. This last function, the inferential, is significant because it links a pattern of language use with ecological factors. The perceptual qualities communicated by sound symbolism help Quechua speakers to 'read' their environment. A bird's cry, for example, might be an index for a potential source of food; the imminent arrival of a jaguar; or impending darkness. It is essential, therefore, that these perceptual qualities be conventionalized with linguistic forms so that they can be used as a basis for communication.

Further consideration of linguistic sound symbolism as a perceptual mode of expression, rather than as a merely 'expressive', ornamental form of language will reveal much about the ways in which other linguistic cultures conceptualize their worlds. Current work by cognitive linguists (Lakoff 1987; Johnson 1987) has demonstrated that our own thinking is perceptually based, metaphorically expressed, and grounded in bodily experience. Sound symbolic discourse complements these studies because it communicates perceptual experiences that are defined by one's bodily alignment in a simulation of a cinematic-like space and time. However, a member of a Euro-American linguistic culture could not under ordinary
circumstances engage in sound symbolic discourse in the way that Quechua speakers do. Our literate scientific standards would frame its usage as childish, frivolous, irrational, and possibly psychotic. Yet, as this paper has demonstrated, Quechua speakers use sound symbolic language quite freely. When asked about their meanings, they treated these forms as both self-evidently meaningful and explicable through paraphrasing and contextual elaboration. Sound symbolism can best be understood within an anthropological perspective as a distinctive style of conversational involvement and a special type of performance functioning as a cinematic-like verbal text. The more general contributions of this paper have been: (1) to demonstrate that some of the structures and functions of natural language discourse cannot be derived from conventional categories of linguistic science; and (2) to suggest that we have to understand the values that 'we' and 'they' attribute to our respective repertoires of semiotic modes in order to appreciate the significance of their messages.

Notes

1. This paper uses data collected during fifteen months of fieldwork in Ecuador, from January 1987 through June 1988. I received financial support for the field work stage of this project from the Committee on Latin America and the Caribbean of the Social Science Research Council, the Wenner-Gren Foundation, and the National Science Foundation. Its writing up was supported by the American Association of University Women. To all of these agencies, I express my deepest appreciation. I thank Richard Bauman, Charles Nuckolls, and Deborah Tannen for comments on an earlier draft, and Evan P. Young for his editorial assistance. Although they will never read this, I would also like to thank Antonia, Camilla, Eloise, Faviola, Jacinta, and Malako for putting up with all of the nuisances and impositions created by my presence among them.

2. The concept of literacy as a cultural ideal is also supported by the work of sociolinguists who have shown that the oral/literate dichotomy represents a set of values which continue to influence our perceptions of significant ethnic and socio-economic differences (Tannen 1980, 1984; Kochman 1975). Such work has made the interesting discovery, moreover, that orality and literacy as values may be operative outside their respective media (Tannen 1982a; Chafe 1982). What defines orality and literacy as values, then, is an attitudinal alignment that frames what is communicated. Tannen (1982b) suggests that oral and literate values can be characterized, respectively, as involved in the communicative interaction, or focused on the message content itself. Involvement as an attitudinal alignment implies all of the ways that one communicates an empathetic, cooperative, and personal message. Focus on message content, by contrast, implies maximally coherent and explicit communication. The assumption underlying this scheme is that certain properties intrinsic to oral and written media came to be associated with a set of values. These values, in turn, have taken on a life of their own in the sense that they are no longer restricted to spoken and written messages. To
put it in an overtly simple way, oral communication has come to be associated with affectivity, expressivity, and simplicity, while literate communication has come to represent abstraction, logic, and complexity.

3. The actual statement is as follows: 'The advantage of arbitrariness over iconicity, in human language versus bee communication, is the same as the advantage of a true writing system over against a picture writing system, or the advantage for purposes of wide application of a digital computer over an analog computer. An analog computer, a picture writing system, or bee dancing, can be beautifully adapted for a narrow function, and at the same time, worthless for anything else. Human beings can talk about anything; bees can only talk about nectar'.

4. Admittedly, Samarin (1991: 53) has recently suggested that the expressive aspect of sound symbolic words has been overemphasized, and that not enough attention has been given to the ways in which these words are integrated with their languages. My own research on sound symbolism supports this statement. I found (Nuckolls 1990) that in Pastaza Quechua, a class of sound symbolic words function grammatically insofar as they encode perfective aspect distinctions.

5. Levy-Bruhl is assuming a folk model of perception which considers it to be a passive response to stimuli, and therefore a simpler and earlier cognitive operation than abstract, reasoned thought.

6. This is most recently articulated by Bauman and Briggs in the following statement: 'As the concept of performance has been developed in linguistic anthropology, performance is seen as a specially marked, artful way of speaking that sets up or represents a special interpretive frame within which the act of speaking is to be understood. Performance put the act of speaking on display — objectifies it, lifts it to a degree from its interactive setting and opens it to scrutiny by an audience' (1990: 73).

7. In addition to their intonational foregrounding, there is another sense in which sound symbolic words are comparable to images; however, this particular sense is not evident in the data to be presented. I am referring to instances when sound symbolic adverbs are used to stand for an entire proposition, rather than to modify a verb. Recall the example from English of the sound symbolic word 'click', which, when used by itself, can be said to stand for a proposition of the form 'X hung up on Y'. When used in this way, sound symbolic adverbs condense a proposition into a structure which is image-like because it can't be broken down into discrete bits of meaning. A word such as 'click', when used by itself, must be considered as a whole structure of meaning just as a representational image must be considered as a whole.

8. The following transcriptional conventions are used:

--- Regular script is used for Quechua utterances.
--- SMALL CAPITAL LETTERS ARE USED FOR TRANSLATIONS.
--- Dashes indicate a break in the flow of an utterance.
--- Dots... indicate a speaker's contemplative pausing.
--- [A bracket introducing an utterance means that it is spoken at the same time someone else is talking.
--- (Parentheses are used around words added to make the translation smoother).
--- A portion of a word may be pronounced in an extended way. In such cases, one letter will be taken to represent the most prominent part of that extension's sound and will be transcribed in multiples: for example, the adverb dzing may be pronounced 'dziiiiing',
--- If the extension of a word's pronunciation glides upward in pitch as well, it will be transcribed to reflect that. For example the adverb sa may be pronounced sa
— An entire word might be pronounced in a way that is noticeably louder, more forceful, or higher pitched than its surrounding utterance. It will be transcribed by raising it above the utterance's normal line.

— When a word undergoes multiple repetition, the rhythm, pace, and force of the repetitions may vary. To indicate that there is a trailing off in the pronunciational force given a series of repeated words, they will be represented with diminishing type size. For example, repetitions of the adverb pa may be represented as: pʰaa pa papa.

— The following marks over a series of repetitions indicates a stressed/unstressed pattern: ‘^-^-^-^-.

9. There hasn't been much attention given to the relationships between patterns of language use and ecology. Notable exceptions are Feld (1982) and Heath (1983). Feld's ethnography links sound (specifically, melodic patterns) with bird songs, myth, aesthetics, and ritualized forms of emotional expression. Heath establishes connections between the use and ordering of space and time, patterns of language use, and the success or failure of children in public schools.

References


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