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## **A STUDY OF ONOMATOPOEIA IN TOKYO DEBUNKER GAME ON THE PROLOGUE SECTION**

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### **Abstract:**

This study aims to analyse the use of onomatopoeia in the prologue of the game Tokyo Debunker, utilising Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory (1986) to understand the relationship between the onomatopoeia and the corresponding images on the panel. Meanwhile, the classification of onomatopoeic forms is made based on the theory of Wijana (2008) and the theory of Thomas and Clara (2004), which divides onomatopoeia into several categories, such as human voices, natural sounds, animal sounds, and various sound imitations. Using a descriptive qualitative research method, this study maps the types of onomatopoeia that appear in the prologue of the game and how these sounds contribute to the formation of the atmosphere and the character's interaction with the environment. The results show that most of the onomatopoeias used in Tokyo Debunker's prologue come from the categories of human voice and various sound imitations, which reflect various interactions with physical objects and human emotional expressions. Meanwhile, nature and animal sounds only appear in limited numbers but still play a role in creating a more lively atmosphere. This finding confirms that onomatopoeia serves as an important element in enhancing narrative and player experience, especially in the context of games that rely on audiovisual interaction. This article will further discuss the meaning and influence of onomatopoeia on the narrative structure in game prologues.

**Keywords:** Onomatopoeia, Game, Narrative.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Interactive digital media, especially video games, have taken a considerable leap over the last few years and are now ranked among the leading global entertainment mediums. In contrast

to conventional media, games create a more creative narrative experience by mixing a player's interaction with textual, visual, and auditory aspects within a game environment. The use of sound imitation words (onomatopoeia) is of great significance for a film-linguistic experiment to strengthen the harmony of sound and visuals in such media. Sound imitation words refer to words that recreate the sounds of natural phenomena or humans/animals but, in fact, written language through the creation of sound experiences. When onomatopoeia is used in narrative-based visual media, it not only imitates the sounds but also becomes a narrative device that helps build the atmosphere, evoke emotion and bring the audience closer to the story.

A considerable number of research works revolved around onomatopoeia. One such paper is Arhadi (2014) where the author investigated the different lexical categories of onomatopoeia in the Indonesian comic, focusing on the classification and production of sounds. Dewi et al. (2018) and Erlina and Samingin (2021) also analyzed the functions of onomatopoeia in comics and learning materials to prove that sound symbolism plays an essential role in narrative comprehension. The researchers of Indonesian-Western comics Komang et al. (2021), Giyatmi et al. (2023), and Julinafta and Sari (2022) have also studied the use of onomatopoeia in the works of Wonder Woman, Tintin, and Spider-Man. The authors of the abovementioned papers primarily focus on sound identification, count, and grouping according to the sources.

Additionally to comics, researchers analyzed the use of onomatopoeia in manga and webtoon. Purwani et al. (2020) analyzed the use of onomatopoeia in Japanese fairy tales and manga and then referred to a person translating natural sounds into linguistic forms. Wibawati et al. (2022) and Lia et al. (2024) also researched how onomatopoeia was used in manga and webtoons and explained that sound-words support visual storytelling and assist the readers in imagining the auditory experience. Ardianto et al. (2022) characterized an onomatopoeia as "visualized sound" and pointed to its capacity to connect auditory perception with visual representation in narrative media.

The main point of the studies done earlier is that they primarily dealt with onomatopoeia as a language or stylistic tool while it can also be examined as a cognitive and pragmatic concept. The main focus of these works was on the stationary media which lacks the active nature of the engagement and where the interpretation is mainly accomplished through visual stimuli. Because of this, the authors have not thoroughly looked into the interplay of the sound representations and the surrounding visual context. On top of that, the matter of onomatopoeia used in interactive digital games is still barely touched. Games are fundamentally different from comics and books, in that they require the involvement of the player, the player's sequential interaction and multimodal interpretation. The question of how players mentally process onomatopoeia when it is linked to the visual panels in a game narrative has barely surfaced in the articles so far.

The limitation here clearly exposes a research gap. Over the last few years, most of the time, scholars have only studied whether the types of onomatopoeia be present, and they have narratively discussed their functions in comics and web-media. However, little attention has been paid to the research of onomatopoeia and its usage in interactive audiovisual games. On the other hand, the literature also lacks the application of pragmatic theories used to explain the production of meaning through the interaction of sound words and images. More specifically, Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory, which centers on cognitive effects and the interpretation of context, has not been broadly utilized to evaluate onomatopoeia, particularly in the digital gaming industry. Up till now, no research work has chosen this model to explain the relevancy between the visual elements of the game and the onomatopoeia in the narrative prologue.

Relevance theory facilitates communication as an interpretation process of the implied meaning based on the most relevant context and the least cognitive effort. In the case of visual storytelling, onomatopoeia can be seen as a cognitive schema allowing the audience to tie written representations of the sounds with memory noises within a short time. In the absence of onomatopoeia, narrative comprehension and emotional engagement would have most likely been diminished since onomatopoeia triples the cognitive effects and enables the recipients to engage on multiple sensory levels. A plausible explanation for the research lies behind the words “sound representations,” and the theory is “relevance,” as it digs deeper to the real reasons why a listener’s attention is required on the sounds included in narrative games if immersion is the goal.

The novelty of this research lies in its integration of onomatopoeia classification with relevance theory to analyze sound–image relationships in an interactive game narrative. Unlike previous studies that focus primarily on identifying types of onomatopoeia, this study investigates how onomatopoeia achieves relevance through its relationship with visual elements and narrative context. By emphasizing cognitive effects rather than merely structural features, this research provides a deeper understanding of onomatopoeia’s role in meaning construction within digital games.

The research revolves around the prologue in the game titled Tokyo Debunker. The reason behind the choice of the game is that it is highly narrative-based and uses visuals heavily accompanied by sound-text representation. The prologue is a pivotal part of the story as it introduces the characters, plays with the atmosphere, and sets the narrative expectations to the players. Onomatopoeia is a frequently used technique in this part of the game, and it is utilized to express characters’ emotions, nature, and the sounds of the objects, which serves as an excellent example of sound symbolism. When compared to action games where the main focus is on the mechanical sound effects, Tokyo Debunker is more about immersion in the narrative, which results in the possibility to carry out a more detailed exploration of how written sound effects and visual storytelling work together.

Thus, this research intends to dissect the onomatopoeia use in the Tokyo Debunker’s prologue by classifying type and studying how the sound works together with the visual components based on Sperber and Wilson’s relevance theory. This study follows a qualitative descriptive methodology and seeks to be a source of contribution for linguistic and media studies. The contribution revolves around the innovative ways of onomatopoeia, which combines a cognitive process and a narrative device, is used in interactive digital games. The major finding from this study will be a good contribution to the ongoing discussion regarding sound symbolism and audiovisual interaction as well as narrative building in modern digital media.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach combining it with case study research. A case study approach was chosen because the Tokyo Debunker prologue is a distinctive form of storytelling that mostly uses audiovisual elements to communicate the story, the characters, and the emotional atmosphere right from the start of the gameplay. In contrast to the rest of the game that is based on dialogues and game mechanics, the prologue mainly consists of visual panels with sound text representations. Therefore, in the story, onomatopoeias are used as the main narrative device and not just as additional elements. Because of this, the prologue is a highly concentrated and ideal dataset to investigate how onomatopoeias and visuals work together to create meaning and mood in an interactive story.

Qualitative research is about understanding the nature of things using words, images, and the context of the situation instead of doing numerical measurement. Sugiyono (as quoted in Muslima AT, 2021) stated that qualitative research is mainly concerned with the meaning and interpretation that can be inferred from the data in the real world itself. Conforming with this idea, the descriptive method applied in this research paper gives the researcher the opportunity to recognize, categorize, and interpret the use of onomatopoeia along with the visual and narrative contexts in the video game. This method allows the researcher to dig deeper into how sound symbolism is used not only as a component of narrative structure but also as a factor that deepens player immersion in the prologue section of Tokyo Debunker.

### **Instruments and Data Collection Techniques**

Structured observation is the main way of collecting data in this research. Nevertheless, the observation process is further facilitated by analytical instruments to be able to collect data in a systematic and consistent way. The major instrument is an observation checklist that is created based on the classification theory of onomatopoeia by Wijana (2008) and Thomas and Clara (2004), as well as the relevance theory by Sperber and Wilson (1986). The checklist encompasses categories such as the types of onomatopoeia, the visual context, the character's actions, the environmental depiction, and the narrative function. These analytical instruments not only help the researcher in accurately identifying and recording onomatopoeic expressions but also minimize subjectivity in the observation process.

The data were gathered via the direct observation of the prologue part of Tokyo Debunker. The researcher scrutinized every scene and visual panel in the prologue and made a record of all the onomatopoeias found, such as those imitating human, natural, animal, and object sounds. To capture the visual contexts complementing the onomatopoeia, the researcher took screenshots so that the analysis of the relationship between the sound expressions and the visual elements could be done in detail.

### **Observation Point**

The observation point of this study is only about individual visual panels or scenes in the prologue section where onomatopoeia is explicitly shown. Each observation point is a panel or a scene that visually shows onomatopoeic text together with character movement, facial expression, or environmental change. The researcher is concerned with the onomatopoeia's placement, form, and typographical emphasis, as well as how it fits the visual elements. This study, by setting clear observation points, limits the scope to the interaction between sound symbolism and visual narration rather than general gameplay features.

### **Data Classification and Analysis Techniques**

Firstly, the data collected were divided into groups based on onomatopoeia categories proposed by Wijana (2008) and Thomas and Clara (2004), which include human sounds, natural sounds, animal sounds, and imitations of object sounds. Once the data were classified, they were analyzed through Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory (1986). The study reveals the panel's

onomatopoeic expression's relationship to the visual elements and checks whether the sound alternative can provide important cognitive effects that are helpful for narrative comprehension.

The analysis method is made up of mainly three phases: detection of the onomatopoeic words, categorization of those words following the theoretical categories, and evaluation of their appropriateness to the visual and narrative contexts. This interpretative analysis enables the study to examine the role of onomatopoeia in enhancing atmosphere, lore, and player immersion in the prologue of Tokyo Debunker.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Research Findings**

The findings reveal that onomatopoeia in the prologue of Tokyo Debunker does not function merely as a sound imitation, but as a multimodal narrative device that supports meaning construction through the interaction of text and visuals. The onomatopoeia identified in the data appears strategically in panels that emphasize emotional tension, character movement, and environmental changes. This indicates that the presence of onomatopoeia is motivated by narrative needs rather than random stylistic choices.

Human sounds and object sound imitations dominate the prologue section, reflecting the narrative focus on character reactions and physical interactions with the surrounding environment. These sound representations guide players' interpretation of events by providing immediate auditory cues that align with visual actions. Meanwhile, animal and natural sounds appear less frequently but are used selectively to establish atmosphere and reinforce the setting.

Rather than functioning independently, each onomatopoeic expression is embedded within a visual panel that provides contextual information such as character posture, facial expression, motion, or environmental conditions. This confirms that onomatopoeia in Tokyo Debunker operates as a multimodal element whose meaning emerges through its relevance to visual context.

### **Analysis of Onomatopoeia Based on Narrative Function and Relevance Theory**

#### **Human Sounds**

Human sound onomatopoeia appears predominantly in panels depicting emotional reactions or physical exertion. For example, the onomatopoeia "*Huff huff*" appears in a scene where a character is shown running with a visibly exhausted posture. The visual depiction of heavy breathing, combined with the written sound, creates a strong cognitive effect that allows players to instantly infer fatigue without the need for explicit narration.

According to Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory (1986), communication is considered relevant when it produces significant cognitive effects with minimal processing effort. In this case, "*Huff huff*" provides an efficient shortcut for players to interpret the character's physical condition. The sound does not merely imitate breathing but functions narratively to emphasize urgency and tension within the scene.

Similarly, “*Eeeek!!*” appears in panels portraying sudden shock or fear, accompanied by exaggerated facial expressions and abrupt body movement. The relevance of this sound arises from its immediate recognizability and its alignment with the visual cues, allowing players to process the emotional state quickly and intuitively.

### **Natural Sounds**

Natural sound onomatopoeia such as “*Whooooo*” and “*Fwoosh fwoosh*” appears in panels illustrating environmental changes, particularly wind movement. These sounds are typically placed in scenes with wide visual frames, flowing backgrounds, or character clothing affected by wind. The narrative function of these sounds is not to introduce action but to enhance atmospheric immersion.

From the perspective of relevance theory, these sounds contribute contextual information that enriches the scene without increasing cognitive load. Players do not consciously analyze the sound but subconsciously integrate it with the visual environment, reinforcing the sense of space and movement. This demonstrates how natural sound onomatopoeia supports environmental storytelling rather than direct plot progression.

### **Animal Sounds**

Animal sound onomatopoeia, such as “*Meow*”, appears sparingly but plays a meaningful role in character interaction and mood modulation. In a panel depicting a cat, the appearance of “*Meow*” functions as an anchoring cue that confirms the presence and behavior of the animal.

The relevance of this sound lies in its high familiarity and low processing cost. Players instantly associate the sound with the image, creating a seamless multimodal experience. Although narratively simple, this use of onomatopoeia strengthens realism and emotional warmth within the scene.

### **Imitations of Object Sounds**

Object sound imitations such as “*Clack clack*,” “*Crash*,” “*Bang*,” and “*Click*” appear in scenes involving physical interaction with objects or sudden impact. These sounds are visually reinforced by motion lines, object displacement, or close-up shots of actions.

For instance, “*Clack clack*” accompanies footsteps in a corridor scene, emphasizing movement and rhythm. The sound helps pace the narrative and draws attention to character motion. In relevance theory terms, the sound increases cognitive salience by highlighting actions that are narratively important, such as movement toward a new location or the initiation of an event.

Louder sounds like “*Crash*” and “*Bang*” signal narrative turning points, such as sudden danger or dramatic change. Their placement within visually dynamic panels ensures high relevance by producing strong cognitive effects that demand player attention.

## Discussion

The findings demonstrate that onomatopoeia in the prologue of Tokyo Debunker functions as a multimodal meaning-making tool rather than a decorative linguistic feature. When analyzed through Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory, it becomes evident that onomatopoeia is used to optimize communication efficiency between the game narrative and the player.

Rather than repeating information already conveyed by visuals, onomatopoeia complements visual cues by amplifying emotional intensity, clarifying physical actions, and reinforcing environmental conditions. This synergy reduces the need for explanatory text while maintaining narrative clarity and immersion.

The application of relevance theory reveals that onomatopoeia is strategically placed to maximize cognitive effects with minimal interpretative effort. Sounds that align closely with visual context are processed faster and contribute more effectively to narrative understanding. This explains why certain sounds appear repeatedly in emotionally charged or action-oriented scenes, while others are reserved for atmospheric purposes.

Unlike previous studies that focus primarily on classification, this study highlights the functional motivation behind onomatopoeia usage in interactive media. The prologue of Tokyo Debunker demonstrates that written sound effects play a crucial role in guiding player interpretation, enhancing immersion, and supporting narrative progression through multimodal interaction.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that onomatopoeia in the prologue of Tokyo Debunker functions as a multimodal narrative device rather than merely a linguistic sound imitation. Through the interaction between written sound representations and visual elements, onomatopoeia contributes significantly to narrative clarity, emotional expression, and atmospheric construction within the game's opening sequence.

The findings reveal that human sounds and object sound imitations are predominantly used to emphasize character reactions and physical interactions, while natural and animal sounds support environmental immersion and mood setting. When examined through Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory, these sound representations demonstrate high relevance by producing strong cognitive effects with minimal processing effort, enabling players to interpret narrative meaning efficiently.

This research highlights the importance of onomatopoeia as a meaning-making resource in interactive digital games, particularly in narrative-driven contexts. By applying relevance theory, this study extends previous onomatopoeia research beyond classification and demonstrates how sound-image relationships contribute to immersive storytelling. Future research may explore the use of onomatopoeia across different game genres or interactive media to further examine its role in multimodal communication and narrative engagement.

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