

# **A Phonosemantic Study of Some Selected Hollywood Action Movies' Titles**

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**دراسة صوتية - دلالية لبعض عناوين الافلام الحركية  
”الهوليوودية المنتقة“**

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## Abstract:

The present study tries to check the phonosemantic meaning that sounds have in some selected Hollywood action movies' titles. The study adopts the Universal Theory that Agrawal suggested (2010) as a model for the analysis. The chosen movies are those movies which won or were nominated for the Oscar award and other awards, such as BAFTA. The study can reveal the association between the selected movies' titles and their events. The present study is intended to accomplish the following objectives: First shedding light on the phonological features and patterns that are found in the titles of the selected movies. Second, finding out the association between the sounds and the meanings of the titles and their reflection on the events of the related movies, and third, checking phonologically the stylistic features of the sound patterns in titles of the chosen movies. Among the most important conclusions of the study are: Sounds are meaning-bearing elements and titles reflect the events of their movies.

**ملخص:**

تهدف الدراسة الحالية لنقصي العلاقة بين الاصوات والمعاني في الكلمات التي تتركب من تلك الاصوات وهي عناوين الافلام التي انتجتها هوليوود. تم تطبيق النظرية الكونية للكاتب الهندي اكراول لتحليل العناوين التي اختيرت. وقع الاختيار على الافلام الفائزة او المرشحة لجائزة الاوسكار او الجوائز الاخرى. التطرق لأسلوبية استخدام الاصوات في تركيب هذه العناوين وتأثيرها على المعنى. بعد تطبيق النظرية والمناقشة تبين الاتي: تحمل الاصوات العديد من المعاني بالإضافة الى ان اعتبار العناوين انعكاساً لأحداث الافلام، حيث يمكن فهم الفلم من خلال الاطلاع على عنوانه.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** المعنى الصوتي الدلالي,  
النظرية الكوني, الافلام الحركية

**Key words:** Phonosemantics,  
Universal Theory, Action Movies

## Literature Review

People all over the world live in groups and communities interacting with each other in the same place and with other groups in many ways of communication. Verbal tools (languages), facial expressions, body languages as well as gestures are ways for expressing feelings, needs and attitudes. Language according to Crystal ( 2008: 265) “may refer to the concrete act of speaking, writing or signing in a given situation”. Each language is comprised of many levels, namely: the phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic levels. The first level of language which is the phonological one includes segmental features, which are phonemes, and suprasegmental ones , such as stress, intonation and rhythm.

The name of an object seems not to be random, since many studies across-languages show that sounds have a great effect on the meaning of the name of an object. For example, the word “sea” in Arabic is associated with many names each of which represents or reflects the rate of the waves of that sea, rajjas associates the name of the sea with the sound of thunder, whereas, raijaf refers to the waves that are so rough , since the sound /s/ can be louder than the /f/ sound (Mohammed, 2021, p.39).

Linguists, such as Ohala, Jespersen, Jakobson, who adopted the idea of the natural relation of sound and meaning produced a new term which is phonosemantics. It can be understood clearly from its name “phonosemantics” that is a combination of phonology (the study of sounds pattern, and all systematic use of sounds within language) and semantics (the study of the meaning of signs, words and larger units). So, the aim of this field is meaning and how phonemes or sounds have the role or natural reflection of the meaning of larger units, such as clusters, syllables and words.

Phonosemantics is a school of thought which believes that each sound in the universe has a meaning gained by nature. When we write or utter a sound, it may reflect some emotions inside the listener. Adherents of this school of thought argue that even the unknown words can be understood by depending on the general meaning of the phonemes. Phonosemantic studies are done by either of two ways, the first one is by analyzing the phonemes of a language and clarifying how they have association to meaning. The other way, on the other hand, is by inventing unknown words and asking participants to connect them to shapes or guess their meanings.

## Previous Studies

### The Role of Sound Symbolism in Language Learning

Monaghan, et al.(2012, pp.1152-1162) conducted a study which dealt with the role of sound symbolism in language learning. Participants were given sixteen non-words, some words contained high front vowels, others comprised from low back vowels. The onset and coda positions were occupied by some consonant sounds, such as /b/, /m/, /n/, and /l/. The participants were asked to link these words to rounded or angular shaped items. The results showed that most of the participants connected the rounded shaped item with words that contained the low back vowels and the angular shaped items were linked to words that included high front vowels.

### Early Sound Symbolism for Vowel Sounds

Spector & Maurer (2013, pp.239-241) believed that children associate some vowel sounds with certain shapes. They did their study on a group of children that were in the age of 2.5-year-olds. Pairs of nonsense words were used, each with the sound /i/ or the sound /O/. The toddlers were asked to point at the rounded or jagged shapes. They concluded that children at this age are sensitive to sound symbolism of vowels.

## The Natural Motivation of Sound Symbolism

Kwon (2015, pp.1-254) tested the role of sound symbolism in guessing meaning using Korean and English nonsense words. He tested a naive people by asking them to associate Korean words with their meaning in English and vice versa. The participants were Korean and English-speaking participants. The study concluded that people can understand or guess the meaning of ideophonic words or iconic words even they cannot speak the words of that language in question.

## What sound symbolism can and cannot do: Testing the iconicity of ideophone from five languages

Dingemanse et al. (2016, pp.117-133) tested the potential of the ideophonic words from five languages: Japanese, Korean, Semai (west Malaysia), Siwu (local language in Ghana) and Ewe (Togo). Eighty-two Dutch listeners participated in that test. The participants heard the ideophonic words and asked to associate them with listed meanings. The study concluded that people can correctly guess the meaning of the ideophonic words from languages they do not speak. Thus, the study clarified that the ideophones across the five languages have iconic properties.

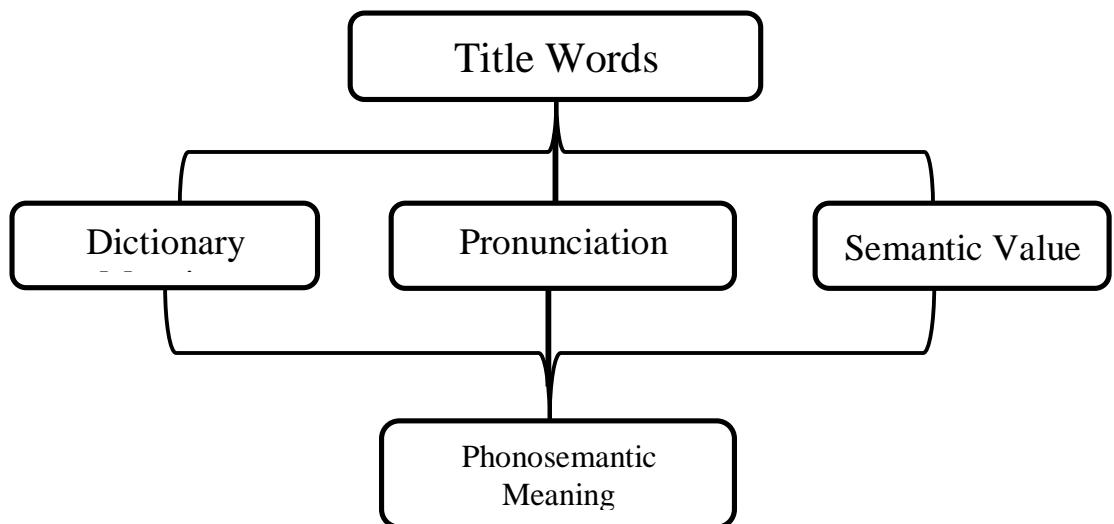
## The Two Meaning of Sound Symbolism

Elsen (2017, pp. 491-497) clarified in his study that there were natural relationships holding between a sound and its referent. The study is about analyzing the association of science fiction and fantasy titles and their phonosemantic reflections. More than ninety students were chosen in this test. They were asked to associate some titles with beautiful lady names, ugly monster, kind creatures and powerful magician. The results showed that words that contained the sound /a/ were linked to beautiful ladies' names, whereas the words that contained a final consonant were linked to male names. Furthermore; back vowel sounds, such as /k/, /g/ and /n/ sounds were connected with monster names

## Methodology

In this study, an attempt is made to explore phonosemantics within some selected movies' titles that Hollywood has produced to clarify the association between sounds and the meanings in the formulation of the titles. Pramod Kumar Agrawal who is a science scholar and works in the field of philosophical aspects of science, suggested in his books "Theory of Phonosemantics" in 2010 a general theory called "the Universal Theory", this theory will be the model for this study. Universal Theory looks to sounds as meaning-bearing elements within the constructing of the words. Agrawal says in his book The Meaningfulness of Sounds that every sounds says something (2016, p.1).

The steps to apply the Universal Theory are: Listing the example words (titles of the movie), providing dictionary meaning for the example word, then the pronunciation after that checking the semantic value and all these steps lead to the final result which is the phonosemantic meaning.



**Figure (1) The model Application**

Agrawal mentions in his books and essays about the application of this suggested theory that some notes should be taken into consideration when someone apply this theory:

- 1- There is a specific psychological feeling for each phoneme. These feelings are explained in literary meaning. Agrawal believes that the development of languages takes place by converting feelings into sounds.
- 2- Language is a stream of psychological messages that convert into intellectual messages, so grammar does not attach any attention.
- 3- The focus in the description is on the phonemes only without focusing on the effect of stress, tunes or intonation.
- 4- This theory does not deal with function or grammatical words, such as “the”, “but”, it deals with content or lexical words only, since grammatical words have little identifiable meaning.
- 5- There is not any description for diphthongs and triphthongs, they can be analyzed according to their elements. For example, the sound /eɪ/ can be described with the features of the sounds /e/ and /ɪ/ (Agrawal, 2010,2014,2016,2020).

All the descriptions that Agrawal mentioned in his previous books and essays are rewritten in a clear way that can be understood easily in his last essay “Psychological Model of Phonosemantics” in 2020. He (2020, pp.12-15) provides a description for each sound within its group, such as submitting appearance, acquiring identity, and so on. Each sound has many descriptions or meanings, and to apply the theory, the researcher can use the description that fits the purpose of the study.<sup>1</sup>

As it is mentioned in the preceding foot note, the chosen description depends on the purpose of the study to reach the meaning. In other words, when there are more than one meaning for the same sound, the researcher can use the appropriate one for the purpose of the study. If the same sound is used more than once in the same title, then the chosen description or meaning starts from the first description and moves towards the following. For example, if the title contains two /w/ sounds, so the first /w/ sound will be described as “invisible existence” whereas the second

one can be read as “acceptable existence”. It is worth mentioning that Merriam Webster Dictionary is the one which is used in providing the dictionary meanings in the application of the Universal Theory in this study and the phonemic notation is the one that is suggested by Peter Roach (2009).

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<sup>1</sup> Personal communication with the founder of “The Universal Theory”. Agrawal states that each sound psychologically can have many intellectual meanings and the choice of the representation depends on the purpose of which is needed.

### Action movies

Neale (2000, p.46) declares that action or “action-adventure” as he says is that genre of movies which encompasses a variety of other movies kind, such as science fiction, thriller and war movies. He adds that action movies are linked to physical action, chases and explosions. So, action movies are a movie genre in which the protagonists face many difficult circumstances and actions like fighting and violence within the events of the movie. The hero or the main character in such a movie faces many hard situations and his life may be threatened; he usually struggles against dangerous villains. This kind of movies is characterized by a fast-moving plot with a lot of exciting events. Ten selected movies’ titles are listed chronologically from the action movies’ titles. The titles are <sup>1</sup>: “Jaws”, “Rocky”, “Star War”, “Scarface”, “Full metal jacket”, “Die hard”, “Lord of rings”, “Departed”, “The dark knight” and “Avatar”.

#### 1-“Jaws”

The story of this movie is about a sheriff, seafarer and a marine biologist who gather to kill a white shark that unleashed a chaos on the beach. Many people have been killed by that shark on the beach which was their main place for living. One of the victims is a boy whose mother puts out a bounty to the one who catches or kills that savage animal. These men put their trap which was an air tank. They succeed to let the shark enter the tank and they shoot it. The movie was produced in 1975. It was written by

Peter Benchley, and then it was directed by Steven Spielberg. It won three Oscar awards.

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- <sup>1</sup> This theory does not deal with function or grammatical words, such as “the”, “but”, it deals with content or lexical words only, since grammatical words have little identifiable meaning.

**Table (1) Application No. One**

The title	The dictionary meaning	Transcription	Semantic value
Jaws	bony structures in the mouth. It usually bears teeth on their oral margins	/dʒɔ:z/	/dʒɔ:/ acceptable availability of strength, /z/ lively expression

After the application of The Universal Theory, the phonosemantic meaning of the title can be read as {a thing that indicates strength}.

## 2-“Rocky”

The movie is about Rocky Balboa who is a boxer. He trains all the day to win the championship of heavy weight. One of the most difficult and the final match to win the golden belt was against another very strong boxer who was called Apollo. Apollo does a marvelous match and defeats Rocky many rounds, but the final round Rocky drubs his competitor and wins the match. The movie was written by Sylvester Stallone, and John G. Avildsen was the director. This movie was produced in 1976. It was the Oscar award winner in (1977), also it was nominated for many other awards, such as the BAFTA and the Grammy awards.

**Table (2) Application No. Two**

The title	The dictionary meaning	Transcription	Semantic value
<b>Rocky</b>	difficult to impress or affect. It can also refer to the one who is physically upset or mentally confused	/rdki/	/r/ fullness of acquired concentration, /D/ hidden, /k/ alertness, /ɪ/ noticeable existence

The phonosemantic meaning which can be obtained for the above analyzed title is {existence who is full of concentration and the one who has a hidden alertness}.

### 3-“Star Wars”

There are many movies under the same main title (Star Wars) about different actions against an enemy who threatens the galaxy that have been produced. The first movie was produced in 1977. It was written and directed by George Lucas. This version won more than five Oscar awards. The story of this version is about a man who is called Luke Skywalker. This man is supported by Jedi knight and other robot creatures to rescue the Princess “Leia” from Darth Vader and to save the galaxy.

**Table (3) Application No. Three**

The title	The dictionary meaning	Transcription	Semantic value
<b>Star</b>	a natural luminous body in the sky	/sta:(r)/	/st/ expressed activation, /a/ entity, /r/ forcible full of intelligence
<b>Wars</b>	struggles or competition between opposing forces	/wɔ:(r)z/	/w/ acceptable existence, /ɔ/ availability of existence, /r/ forcible full of intelligence, /z/ lively expression

The phonosemantic meaning that can be associated to the above analyzed title is as follows { existence that is full of intelligence and expresses activity}, this is for the first part “star”, whereas the second one means {actions when existence (person) uses his intelligence forcibly}. So, the final meaning can be read as actions that result when an existence uses his intelligence since he/ she fights against active existences.

#### 4- “Scarface”

The story of this movie is about a Cuban immigrant who leaves his homeland and settles down in Florida in a refugee camp. He works and makes contract with drug dealers. Tony, who is the Cuban man brings violence and death to this city. His mother disowns him for his bad deeds. The evil things that he does, lead to crumble down his life. The movie was written by Oliver Stone, and then directed by Brian De Palma in 1983. It was nominated for more than seven awards, such as the Golden Globe award in (1984) and the Razzie award in (1984).

**Table (4) Application No. Four**

The title	The dictionary meaning	Transcription	Semantic value
<b>Scar</b>	A mark remaining on the skin after an injured tissue has healed.	/skɑ:(r)/	/sk/ expressible consciousness, /ɑ/ through the entity, /r/ dark.
<b>Face</b>	front part of the head	/feɪs/	/f/ towards acquiring the identity, /e/ display, /ɪ/ visible existent, /s/ outside expression

The phonosemantic meaning that can be associated with the first part of the above mentioned title is {expressible dark in the entity (skin)}, whereas the second part means (a visible thing that shows the outside part of the existence}. A Dark mark on the outside part of the body, can be read as a final phonosemantic meaning of the above analyzed title.

### 5- “Full Metal Jacket”

The movie shows the story of the USA army members in Vietnam and how they had changed to be harsh men. The story is divided into two main steams: the first part which is in the base, the place of training, whereas the second one is in the battle field. All the harshness conditions and battles lead the Marine to become very bad soldiers. The movie was written and then it was directed by Stanley Kubrick in 1987. It was the Boston Society of Film Critics award winner in (1988); further more it was nominated for the Oscar and many other awards, such as the BAFTA award.

**Table (5) Application No. Five**

The title	The dictionary meaning	Transcription	Semantic value
<b>Full</b>	complete, especially in detail, number, or duration.	Jacket/fol/	/f/ towards acquiring the identity, /v/ inside existence, /l/ expandable.
<b>Metal</b>	a type of solid material	/metl/	/m/ substance, /e/ indicated, /t/ tendency, /l/ expandable.
<b>Jacket</b>	an outer covering or casing	/dʒækɪt/	/dʒ/ power, /æ/ visibility of existent, /k/ attentiveness, /ɪ/ evident, /t/ tendency.

The phonosemantic meaning of the above selected title can be read as {existence that is expandable and offers inside identity}, this is for the first part. The second one can be read as {a substance which has an expandable tendency}. The last part is associated with this meaning {a visible existence which provides power}. So, the final phonosemantic meaning is an existence that is used to provide power and protection.

## 6- “Die hard”

This movie presents the story of an officer who works in New York and struggles against a gang to rescue his wife “Holly”. John McClane went in a Christmas vacation to visit his wife in Los Angeles. While they were celebrating at the party, a group of robbers led by Gruber took control of the building. The brave officer faced the gang with his weapon and released his wife after the death of all of the members of that gang. The movie was written by Steven E. de Souza, and then it was directed by John Mc Tiernan in 1988. It was nominated more than three times for the Oscar;

more over it won many awards, such as the BMI Film & TV award in (1989), the Japanese Academy award in (1990), and the Blue Ribbon award in (1990).

**Table (6) Application No. Six**

The title	The dictionary meaning	Transcription	Semantic value
<b>Die</b>	to pass out of existence	/dai/	/d/ death, /a/ entity, /I/ evident.
<b>Hard</b>	expressed in a clear and decisive way	/ha:d	/h/ big, /a/ entity, /d/ activated.

The phonosemantic meaning that can be attached to the above mentioned title, for the first part is {an evidence that the entity died}. The meaning that can be associated with the second part is {big and active conditions which face the existence}. Then the resulting meaning of the title is: difficult conditions which face the existence.

### **7- “The Lord of the Rings”**

This movie is about the story of a lost ring which is found and the fate brings the small Hobbit Frodo to destroy that ring to rescue the world. Frodo must make a quest to the Cracks of Doom to destroy the ring. That ring belongs to the Lord of the dark Sauron. Three fellows join Frodo in his journey. They face very bad conditions in their march, such as mountains, forest, snow, darkness and rivers. The main aim behind their journey is to finish the reign of the lord of the dark after the destruction of the ring. The movie was written by Fran Walsh, and then it was directed by Peter Jackson in 2001. It was the Oscar award winner in (2002), the BAFTA award winner in (2002), and Screen Actors Guild award winner in (2002). Also, it was nominated for many other awards, such as the Amanda award, the Norway award in (2002) and the American Cinema Editors award in (2002).

**Table (7) Application No. Seven**

The title	The dictionary meaning	Transcription	Semantic value
<b>Lord</b>	One who has power and authority over others.	/lɔ:d/	/l/ expandable, /ɔ/ acceptable of availability of existence, /d/ state
<b>Rings</b>	a circlet usually of precious metal worn especially on the finger	/rɪŋz/	/r/ identified, /ɪ/ visibly existing existent, /ŋ/ emotionally strong, /z/ lively expression

After the application of the Universal Theory, the phonosemantic meaning that can be associated with the above mentioned title may read as follows {an existence who has a state and power to gain availability}. The second part can be read as {existence which is visible and indicates a strong emotion}. The final title meaning can be read as an existence who has power and strong emotion than others.

## **8- “The departed”**

The movie talks about an undercover cop in a gang group and a spy man in the police station, each of them tries to discover the other one. Billy who is the cop gains the trust of the gang chief “Costello” and Colin who is a criminal person and becomes an informer in the police station. Both men (Billy and Colin) become in danger to be killed after they have been discovered by the gang and the police. At the end, Colin is shot by his friend. The movie was written by William Monahan, and then directed by Martin Scorsese in 2006. It was the Oscar winner in (2006); furthermore, it was nominated for many awards, such as the BAFTA in (2007) and the Screen Actors Guild award in (2007).

**Table (8) Application No. Eight**

The title	The dictionary meaning	Transcription	Semantic value
<b>Departed</b>	having died especially recently	/dɪpə:tɪd/	/d/ death, /ɪ/ evident, /p/ approval, /ə/ entity, /t/ tendency, /ɪ/ evident, /d/ death

The phonosemantic meaning that can be associated with the title is {an approval tendency which indicates the death of the entity}.

### **9- “The dark night”**

The movie tells the story of a hero called the dark night who is shaped like a bat. A sadistic criminal known as “The Joker” appears in Gotham city creating a chaos among the people of this city. Batman uses his strength to stop the evil works of the Joker. At the end of the story, batman saves the city from that evil and he gains the name “the dark knight”. The movie was written, and then directed by Christopher Nolan in 2008. It won more than one Oscar awards in (2009) and other awards, such as the Screen Actors Guild award, and the Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy & Horror Films award in (2009).

**Table (9) Application No. Nine**

The title	The dictionary meaning	Transcription	Semantic value
<b>Dark</b>	wholly or partially black	/da:k/	/d/ had, /a/ entity, /k/ getting fear. existence with /.
<b>Knight</b>	A member of an order or society	/naɪt/	/n/ fullness of identity, /a/ existence with existent, /ɪ/ visible, /t/ towards occupying.

The phonosemantic meaning that can be linked to the first part of the title is {an existence (color) that is associated with fear}, whereas the second part can be read as { a visible existence who has a full identity}. The resulting title is an existence who has powerful identity and is associated with fear.

## 10-“Avatar”

The movie presents the story of Jake who is a paraplegic Marine who left his home and reached the moon Pandora in a especial mission. He likes the way that the local tribe lives in, and then he falls in love with an alien lady called “Neytiri”. He shares the local people “Avatar” their battle to save their home against the people of Earth. After the battle, Avatar people want to kill Jake, but Neytiri saves him and he completes his life there. The movie was written, and then directed by James Cameron in 2009. It was the Oscar winner in (2010), the BAFTA award winner in (2010), and the Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy & Horror Films award winner in (2010/2011). Moreover, it was nominated for many awards in (2010), such as the American Cinema Editors award and the American Society of Cinematographers award.

**Table (10) Application No. Ten**

The title	The dictionary meaning	Transcription	Semantic value
<b>Avatar</b>	in carnation in human form	/ævətə:(r)/	/æ/ visibility of existent, /v/ hidden capability, /ə/ existence, /t/ towards occupying, /a/ inside, /r/intelligence

The phonosemantic meaning that can be read after applying the theory to the above mentioned title is {an existence who is active and has intelligence, and the one who has a hidden capability}.

### **Discussion of the Results**

After the application of “The Universal Theory” to the above ten selected action movies’ titles, it seems that there are many phonological features that are used within the structure of these title. Alliteration, assonance and consonance are phonological tropes used by the movie-makers in forming their movies’ titles. The fourth title (Scarface) shows consonance when the sound /s/ appears in “Scar” and “Face”, but this device is used here as a repetition marker since the movie-makers fused the two words in one form. Furthermore, the third title “Star War” and the fifth title “Full Metal Jacket” include consonance which is represented by the repetition of the sounds /r/ and /l/. The sixth movie (Die Hard) also contains consonance which is the repetition of the sound /d/ in the first and the second parts. In addition to that, repetition is used in “Departed”

Consonant sound, or a consonant cluster can stand for a specific meaning or feeling. The presence of the /-st/ sound cluster refers to noise and violence. So, the title “Star War” can reflect such an action event for its movie. Furthermore, the sound /k/ stands for harshness and activity, and some analyzed titles are constructed from the /k/ sound, such as “the Dark Night” and “Full Metal Jacket”.

The title can be read phonosemantically by depending on the sounds that construct it. Some sounds and sound combination can be linked to some feelings whether happiness, joyfulness or even sadness. The first title (Jaws) end with the sound /z/ which indicates harshness, therefore when this sound comes at the end it attracts much attention. The second title (Rocky) starts with the /r/ sound that attaches to movement and noise. Easy movement and quickness are associated with the sound /v/ which is used in the title “Avatar”. Thus, titles have functions, and one of those functions is that designating the movie or even identifying it.

As it has been mentioned before in the analysis of historical epic movies' titles, the low back vowels stand for largeness, harshness and aggression. The selected action movies' titles are full of low back vowels in their construction. The use of these sounds indicates action and violence in the events of the movies. High front vowels refer to kindness, honesty and smallness. Therefore, the use of these sounds (i.e. high front vowels) in the titles of these selected movies represents minority. Simple vowels are used in these titles more than 15 times. The low back vowels present sixty three percent of that simple sounds, whereas, the high front vowels are thirty seven percent only of the construction of the above analyzed titles.

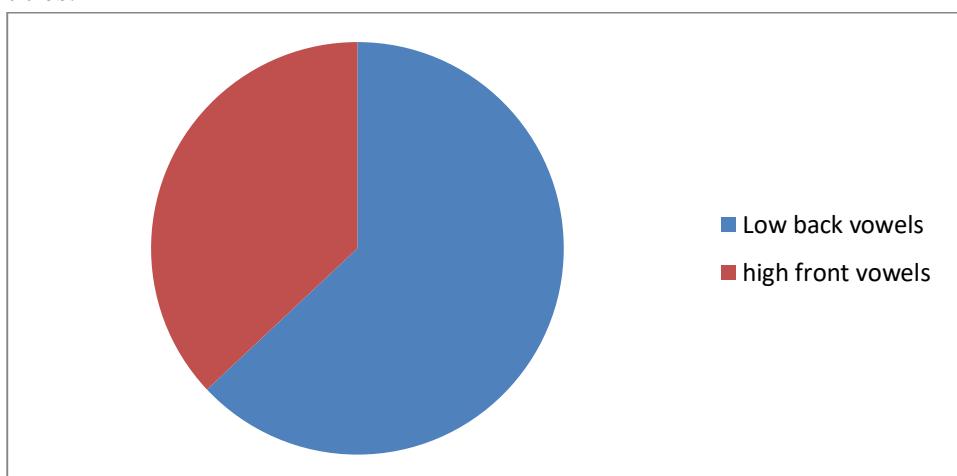


Figure (5) Shows the percentage of the low back vowels and high front ones that the action movies' titles are constructed from

After the previous discussion of the use of the low back and the high front vowel sounds, it can be said that the use of the sounds has a vital role in providing meaning to the movie through the form of the title. These selected movies are full of actions and drama or even fantasy. In addition to that, some of these analyzed movies' titles are formed from more than one syllable or lexical word. This indicates that the movies are full of actions and struggles, and they cannot be summarized in a short title.

## Conclusion

After the application of the Universal Theory, it is proven that sounds are meaning-bearing elements, as well as, sounds can reflect some feelings when they are uttered or read. Then it can be concluded that:

- 1- Phonologically, many stylistic features are used in the formulation of the selected movies' titles, such as alliteration, assonance and consonance, as well as repetition.
- 2- The action movies' titles which are selected in this study are formed from sounds that indicate quickness and activeness.
- 3- Movie makers look to a title as a slogan for their works since they consider the movie as a product like any other companies which produce food, clothes. So, they select a vital and effective title that can attract the audience' attention and then bring them more money.

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