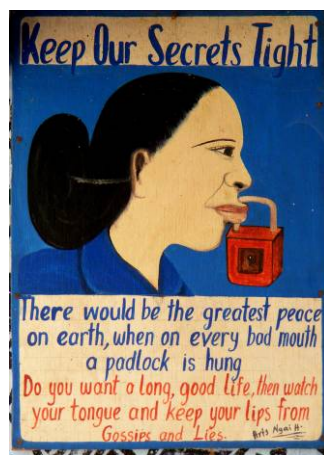# The sensory world; ideophones in Africa and elsewhere

[DRAFT CIRCULATED FOR COMMENT]

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1. Introduction

A characteristic feature of languages worldwide, but particularly those in Africa, is ideophones, words of a distinct semantic type, which can fill one or many syntactic slots. Ideophones may be defined as a subset of sound symbolic words, which can also include phonaesthemes and other strategies (for example ± alternations of ATR vowels), to signal sensory qualities. This field is often referred to as phonosemantics and has a long history in Western philosophy. Plato's Cratylus has a discussion of phonaesthemes, for example. Although ideophones (or 'expressives' in Asian terminology) have begun to be of some interest to the broader scholarly community (e.g. Hinton et al. 1994; Voeltz & Kilian-Hatz 2001) they have hardly excited the attention they merit in terms of their overall importance in the lexicon of many languages.

Ideophones are abundant in natural and heightened speech, notably in Africa, but absent from typical example sentences, hence their failure to be treated adequately in typical grammars and dictionaries. They can be difficult to elicit since their existence is unpredictable and speakers have no natural 'hook' to recall them. Their elusive nature, in grammatical terms, has made them poor relations to other word classes and they have been little treated by the schools of grammar dominated by syntax (see Samarin 1970 for field methods in ideophone research and Welmers 1973 for comment on lacunae in research).

Our understanding of the role they play in natural language (as opposed to elicited examples) is still very preliminary. It seems that ideophones are more prevalent in Africa and parts of Asia than in other regions of the world, although the evidence is more ambiguous. A relative poverty of ideophones appears to be characteristic of Indo-European, but a rich ideophonic lexicon is reported for some Asian languages (eg. Kakehi et al. 1996 for Japanese, Lee 1992 for Korean), for Austronesian (Klamer 1999) and Austroasiatic (Diffloth 1976; Svantesson 1983) and Daic (Enfield 2007). What little evidence we have for Australian and Papuan languages (e.g. Alpher 1984) suggests a more limited repertoire. Lists of ideophones for other predominantly oral regions of the world seem to be remarkably short (see for example those in Hinton et al. 1994) which could signal elicitation problems. Other strategies (such as a rich repertoire of adjectives or adverbs or phonaesthemes) may substitute for ideophones experientially. However, language phyla also just differ and Africa might be a special case.

The classification of ideophones remains under debate. They have been defined very broadly in the literature as anything with a sound-symbolic element, in which case they are realised as all major parts of speech. For example, English verbs such as 'gobble' or 'twinkle' are sometimes treated as ideophones. This seems too broad a definition to be useful, as phonosemantic regularities apply across the lexicon.

In a narrower but more helpful view, ideophones are expressives, characterising sounds, sensations, textures and feelings, usually, but not always, through morphological patterning[1]. In many languages, ideophones have distinctive phonotactics. But they do always have highly specific applications to the sensory world and describe visual, aural and emotional experiences in ways hardly paralleled elsewhere in the lexicon. They have a tendency to fill an adverb-like slot, and they usually have no clear etymologies, although they can give rise to a family of related words, using a consonantal frame rather like a literal base in Semitic. Historically, they are hard to treat, as they do not seem to be lexically cognate across languages. In contrast, typical sensory experiences can be identified s*emantically* across languages and even phyla. Many African languages have ideophones describing analogous experiences, for example, the different noises made by objects falling on the ground. If so, then ideophones are crucial to a broader understanding of the perceptual world implicit in African languages. This paper[2] looks at ideophones both globally and in Africa and

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[1] Mark Dingemanse, who has probably collected more information on this topic than anyone else, defines ideophones as 'marked words that vividly evoke sensory events' (cf. http://ideophone.org/working-definition)

[2] A first version of this paper was given at The Invisible Conference, University of Köln, Germany, on the 15-16th November 2007. I would like to thank the audience for their comments, especially Mark Dingemanse, who has also kindly gone through the pre-submission version. A journey through Cameroun conducting dictionary workshops in March 2009 was facilitated by SIL and I would like to thank Stephen Anderson and Robert Hedinger for organising this, as well as the individual teams who provided examples of ideophones in their languages, in particular Dan Friesen for Oroko, Rev. Nga for Limbum and Abraham Nebup for Yamba. In Nigeria, Tarok data was compiled in collaboration with Selbut Longtau as part of a long-term dictionary project, and the ɛBoze community, especially

discusses some of the many claims made about them in the literature as well as citing new evidence from recent fieldwork in relation to those claims.

2. Ideophones in English and globally

A clear reason why ideophones have been generally so negligently treated by linguists is their low frequency in English. Setting aside phonaesthemes, English ideophones are scattered across the lexicon and usually occur in paired words, which alternate either an internal vowel or an initial consonant. Some typical examples in English are shown in Table 1;

Table 1. English ideophones

Ideophone	Part of speech
Dilly-dally	verb
Ding-dong	onomatopoeia/noun
Flim-flam	noun
Harum-scarum	adverb
Helter-skelter	adverb/noun
Hip-hop	noun
Hocus-pocus	noun
Hugger-mugger	adverb
Knick-knack	noun
Mish-mash	noun
Namby-pamby	adjective
Riff-raff	noun
Shilly-shally	verb
Tell-tale	noun/adjective
Tick-tock	onomatopoeia
Wishy-washy	adjective
Zig-zag	verb/noun

Whether there is any significance in the predominance of forms beginning with h- is unclear. English has a very strong preference for either copy vowels or a front vowel in the first word followed by a central or back vowel in the echo.

3. Ideophones in Africa

The first clear reference to a class of ideophones in African languages was in the mid-nineteenth century, where they are touched on in Vidal's preface to Crowther's Yoruba Dictionary (Crowther 1852). Vidal describes ideophones as a 'peculiar and appropriate adverb which denotes the degree or quality attaching to it' and mistakenly claims they are unique to Yoruba. Koelle (1854) noted the presence of these 'peculiar adverbs' in Kanuri, perhaps the first documentation for a non-Niger-Congo language. McLaren (1886) called ideophones 'indeclinable verbal particles' and in the same year Peck (1886) had begun to analyse them as a cross-language phenomenon in West Africa. Banfield (1915) whose documentation for Nupe is particularly rich, used the term 'intensive adverbs'. For Doke (1935) they were 'a vivid representation of an idea in sound'. Childs (1994) lists some of the other terms occurring in the literature, such as 'echo-words' (in relation to Semitic), 'emphatics' (used by Lutheran Bible translators) and *impressifs* used in Francophone publications. Detailed studies, such as Kunene (1978) on Southern Sotho, suggest that some Niger-Congo languages may have thousands of such ideophones. Samarin (1979) estimates there may be more than 8000 such expressions in Gbaya.

Samarin (1965, 1967, 1971) is one of the few authors to survey Niger-Congo ideophones. He surveyed Bantu ideophones but also explored the wealth of ideophones in Gbaya, a Ubangian language. Other discussions can be found in Evans-Pritchard (1962) for Zande, Courtenay (1976) for Yoruba, Fivaz (1963) and Von Staden (1977) for Zulu, Fortune (1962) for Shona, Nurse (1974) for Nyanja, Geunier (1978) for

Sunday Magaji, kindly helped with body epithets, in which their language is particularly rich. The Nupe data are from fieldwork in 1979-1981.

Malagasy, Hulstaert (1962) for Mongo, Madugu (1987) for Nupe, Mamet (1978) for Ntomba, Noss (1975, 1986) for Gbaya, Uzechukwu (1980) for Igbo, Marivate (1985) for southern Bantu, Mphande (1989), for Tumbuka, Kulumeka (1993, 1997) for Chewa.

A great deal less is known about Nilo-Saharan and Afroasiatic, although Chadic languages are clearly as rich as their Niger-Congo neighbours. Although it is not entirely clear, dictionaries suggest that Afroasiatic and Khoesan are less replete with ideophones and that it is interaction with Nilo-Saharan and Niger-Congo that increases their repertoire. This is curious since there is little evidence for direct lexical borrowing; the process is rather calquing of ideas about expressivity.

An aspect of ideophones in most African languages is reduplication; words are wholly or partly reduplicated according to language-internal rules and it is often these reduplications that give the onomatopoeic sense that plays a role in their generation. Ideophones tend to be polysyllabic and in some cases can be freely extended. However, the amount of reduplication varies from language to language; in Kanuri, for example, where reduplication is *not* a very common process in the language as a whole, many ideophones are monomorphemic. There is probably a very general relationship between canonical structures of words in a language and the form of ideophones.

4. Claims about ideophones

Ideophones are not usually amenable to historical linguistics; their etymologies are generally opaque and there may be little cross-language regularity (see e.g. Westermann 1907, 1927). One often-raised question revolves around renewability and innovation. A claim frequently made in older literature is that ideophones can be constructed by individual speakers to suit a particular speech-event and have no language-wide validity[3]. Do speakers constantly invent new ideophones to suit changing environments? Does the pool of ideophones constantly renew itself over time faster than the replacement rate of ordinary lexemes? Speakers generally claim[4] that ideophones *are* a fixed pool and cannot be just 'made up'. An exception is the imitation of sounds; new technologies may require new ideophones. Individuals can imitate, sometimes remarkably effectively, new auditory experiences. These are initially regarded as outside the language system proper although they may be lexicalised over time.

A common claim in the literature on ideophones in African languages is that they are phonologically marked. This is certainly the case for Bantu languages of southern Africa studied in detail, where specific rules of reduplication and tone-patterns abound. They can contain unusual consonant phonemes (less usually vowels) or sequences. The labio-dental flap, a sound typical of Central Africa, recently recognised by the IPA, *is* more common in many languages in ideophones than in ordinary words. Indeed, its recognition depended on the argument that it is common in 'ordinary' words in the Adamawa language, Mambay (Anonby 2008). Courtenay (1976) argues that phonological markedness is the case in Yoruba, as does Madugu (1987) for Nupe. Ideophones also often contain more glide tones than the ordinary lexicon. A striking aspect of Nupe are the large number of ideophones with predominantly glide tones on syllables, a feature not characteristic of the broader lexicon (Table 2).

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[3] Curiously these ideas live on in fossilised form among literacy specialists and Bible translators. I have frequently been told that ideophones are 'not real words', they 'should not be included in dictionaries' and that 'people just make them up', by competent speakers who should know better. Quite who has propagated these ideas is hard to say, but the consequence is that religious literature and lexicons associated with it can often be entirely devoid of ideophones even where the language they purport to reflect is very rich in them.

[4] This statement is hard to prove. However, I have now collected ideophones for some twenty languages in Nigeria and Cameroun, and run workshops in Cameroun for several languages with the express object of collecting ideophones. In all cases, speakers of individual languages asserted strongly that ideophones were a relatively fixed pool and that the correct ideophone would be known to competent speakers. As far as I have been able to check this, it appears to be true.

Table 2. Nupe ideophones showing predominance of glide tones

Nupe	Gloss
fǎfǎnyí	Very (wide)
gbǔgbǔnyí	Gurglingly
pânyǐ	Sound of a slap
púpûyǐ	Throb or beat of the heart as felt in a sore finger
pǔpǔyí	Poppingly
sǔsǔsùdà	Warm, as foods
swǎswǎgǐ	Tender
tǎtǎyí	Senseless
tětěnyí	Shakily
tǒtǒyí	Flowingly
tsǎgǐtsǎgǐ	Little

Nonetheless, it can also be the case that ideophones contain fewer tonal melodies than ordinary vocabulary, for example, having only High/Low contrasts where the tones of other types of words show more diverse patterns (see for example Dangme in Kropp Dakubu 1998).

Another striking feature of ideophones in some languages is the correspondence between vowel quality and the perceptual qualities of the sensory experience. Table 3 shows pairs of related ideophones in Oroko, a cluster of Bantu languages in southwest Cameroun;

Table 3. Vowel oppositions denoting sound qualities in Oroko

Oroko	Glosses
wáà wáà	sound of moving in dry grass/leaves
wúù wúù	sound of walking in wet grass
kpòó	heavy branch falling
kpéé	light branch falling

Westermann (1937) provides examples of similar relationships for other West African languages. The exact relationship between the quality of the sound and the vowel used to signify it is opaque and there does not appear to be a regular correspondence. Diffloth (1994) argues that individual languages may have systematic sound symbolism applied to ideophones but that such relationships cannot be generalised across languages.

Perception of enviromental sounds can be very precise. Table 4 shows three ideophones in Oroko applied to a person moving in water of different depths.

Table 4. Related experiential qualities in Oroko: moving in water

Oroko	Glosses
càbú càbú	moving in shallow water
cùbúm cùbúm	moving in knee-deep water, jumping/falling in water
wùù …	struggling to walk in deep water

Similar complexities occur in describing liquids pouring out of vessels and objects of different weights falling on the ground. It is certainly the case that in the same ecological region, related languages seem to adopt the same experiential qualities to express with ideophones. Table 5 shows ideophones relating to the same experience in two related languages of the Cameroon Grassfields, Yamba and Limbum.

Table 5. Comparison of ideophones for related concepts in Yamba and Limbum

Yamba	Limbum	Gloss
kpàà	gbàŋ…	noise of a bundle of raffia bars falling to the ground
pìm	gbù'	noise of a stone falling to the ground
kàpkùp	kàpkàp	noise of heavy raindrops hitting the ground
dùùŋ	dèé…	sound of a sticky liquid pouring from a container
càà	tŭŋtŭŋ	sound a free-flowing liquid pouring onto the ground

Clearly there is no regular linguistic relationship between ideophones in these two languages, although some of them appear to be similar. But what *is* common is the idea that certain sounds require expression. Raffia bars are a fundamental building material in this region and a great deal of energy goes into processing and transporting them every dry season for use in construction. So opportunities to express the sound of a bundle falling to the ground are relatively common. Further south, among the Oroko, where raffia is much less important, and the ground more often muddy or soft, no analogous ideophone exists.

Another area that remains opaque is the relationship between the relative elaboration of particular semantic areas and the cultural presuppositions of the society that makes use of them. Comparing Yamba and Limbum, there is a marked distinction in the area of emotional expression. Limbum has a large number of ideophones expressing emotional states (Table 6), whereas these are wholly lacking in Yamba. This is not to claim that Yamba has no means of expressing similar ideas but that they have not focused on a particular marked communicative channel. That Limbum should have elaborated this area almost certainly reflects broader aspects of the society and in particular a need to analyse and describe the emotional states of others. However, a more complete analysis of such differences would require a type anthropological linguistics that still remains a remote aspiration.

Table 6. Limbum ideophones expressing emotional states

Limbum	Sense	Example sentence	Translation
bàpbàp	describes a suspicious appearance	e ce kè' bàpbàp àmbò e wɛ̀ɛ yuu wa'a	His suspicious appearance seems to show he has stolen something
cwɛ̀pcwɛ̀p	describes a person's inflated appearance (or air escaping from a balloon)	ŋkò' yi du rkwe ntar à ka' buu yi kʉtì a ce jɛ̀r cwɛ̀pcwɛ̀p	The masquerade went for a death-celebration, but there was no food, so it came back looking *cwɛ̀pcwɛ̀p*
dòoshìdòoshì	describes being intrusive	à yu dòoshìdòoshì sê	You are very intrusive
njɛ́ŋ	describes being aloof	kanju a kɛ̀' bkòr bèe a ka' niŋ njoo e ku fʉʉ enjoo enɛ njɛ́ŋ	Kanjo started a fight, but when other people became involved he stood aloof
ŋìŋrèŋìŋrè	describes smiling hypocritically	ŋwɛ̀ ca ce kè' ŋìŋrèŋìŋrè àmbò e tʉr yuu mo' à rsùtì wa'a	This man appearance suggests he has something to hide
rìm	describes highly charged emotion	enàti mbekì a laa yuu nyor àluu mɛ̀ enɛ rìm	He said something which made me highly emotional
sò'ní	describes a shrunken appearance	wɛ̀ yaŋ a ke' sò'ní sê	This illness has given you a very shrunken appearance
tórtór	describes behaving in a way indifferent to others	yoo nlàa yi ke be tórtór	The way you speak it seems as if you are indifferent to others
yɛɛŋgèryɛ̀ɛŋgèr	describes suppressed anger or joy	nyor à bep ndì e kuce yɛ̀ɛŋgèryɛ̀ɛŋgèr	Ndi's body is melting with suppressed anger
yɛɛŋgèryɛ̀ɛŋgèr	describes suppressed anger or joy	Nyor à bòŋ Sàamba e kuce yɛ̀ɛŋgèryɛ̀ɛŋgèr	Samba's body is vibrating with joy
yɛ̀kéŋ	describes being faultless	ŋwɛ̀ anà ku fʉʉ e njep mnsa' enɛ yɛ̀kéŋ	that man was judged and found faultless

Limbum	Sense	Example sentence	Translation
yuŋrìyuŋrì	describes a feeling of uneasiness	à ce gèe ba kɛ yuŋrìyuŋrì wa'a	Why do you feel so uneasy?

Ideophones rarely make the transition into fully morphologised nouns. An exception to this is Tocco, a Kordofanian language of the Talodi group, spoken in the Nuba Hills, Sudan. Tocco has a not atypical Niger-Congo system of prefix alternation, although only the first consonant mutates, presumably due to loss of V_1. However, Tocco insect and tree names are ideophonic in appearance, often a reduplicated CVC(VC). The first consonant of the ideophone is re-analysed as a prefix and they have thus been incorporated into the noun-class system (Table 7);

Table 7. Tocco singular plural alternations

sg.	pl.	Gloss
curuŋcuruŋ	muruŋmuruŋ	insect sp.
kiʈikkiʈik	iʈikiʈik	insect sp.
ŋorakŋorak	ɲorakɲorak	insect sp.
propro	krokro	tree sp.
ʈukekʈukek	lakeklakek	locust sp.
carucaru	marumaru	fruit sp.

Another aspect of ideophones in Africa that has so far drawn little comment is the application of a consonantal frame. Just as Semitic languages have a series of literals, and the insertion of different vowels can generate a semantic nexus of meanings, so related meanings cluster will around a sequence of consonants in some African languages. The differential application of reduplication makes a strictly ordered template harder to apply, and it would be perhaps better to understand such semantic clouds as a crossover between phonaesthemes and ideophones proper. Table 8 shows a set of ideophones in Kolokuma Ịjọ, a language of the Niger Delta in Nigeria, which all focus on the notion of walking unsteadily.

Table 8. Kolokuma terms for walking unsteadily, illustrating a consonantal frame

Kolokuma	Sense
táantàantáan	describes a person walking unsteadily, as if disoriented
tákpetàkpe	staggering, as a drunken man
tálakatàlaka	describes a tottering walk on slippery or uneven ground, as if about to fall
talakịtálakị	standing aloof; standing in scattered groups
tálakpetàlakpe	describes walking on undulating ground in a hurry
táleketàleke	describes unbalanced movement
téetèe	moving aimlessly, unsteadily
teketeké	unsteadily, as a toddler
téketèke	tottering, as a newly walking child
tọ́ịtọ̀ị	stealthily on tiptoe, bending forward
tókitòki	way of walking of a tall person whose legs are deformed, so that the he/she walks on tiptoe and unsteadily

Source: Williamson (ined.)

The existence of particular ideophones is not apparently predictable, but these words could be regarded as having a loose template t-(l)-k(p). The three main vowels represented do appear to have approximate semantic correlations;

a   unsteady walk, adult
e   unsteady walk, child
o   walking on tiptoe

Maduka (1988) has also discussed similar phenomena in Ịẹmbe, another Ijoid language. Outside Africa there has been more interest in this topic, for example in Korean (Lee 1992). Indeed some of the early work

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on templatic morphology seems to have been partly inspired by the analysis of ideophones (e.g. McCarthy 1983).

Although they can be shown to apply to individual languages, such relationships do not have Africa-wide validity. The Tarok language, spoken in east-central Nigeria, is a Plateau language with a complex noun-class sytem. As far can be determined, phonological or morphological markedness do not apply to Tarok ideophones. Indeed, Tarok ideophones;

1. cannot be distinguished from adverbs morphologically or syntactically
2. are not morphologically distinct from the main Tarok lexicon
3. have no unusual phonological properties
4. are not tonally distinct from similar non-ideophones
5. but can form meanings through tonal oppositions

The morphology of Tarok adverbs is extremely diverse. The shapes so far identified are shown in Table 9;

Table 9. Canonical shapes of Tarok adverbs

Shape	Example	Gloss
CV	ɗù	describes s.t. cold
CVV	bàу	describes completely disrupting an occasion
CVC	bə̀r	describes the sound of sucking porridge
CVN	baŋ	describes snatching
VCVC	adók	again
NNV	ŋŋa	very, much, plentifully
CVVC	duut	describes a heavily built person doing s.t. shamelessly
CVCV	bobo	describes crying aloud
CVCCV	ɓótcó	describes narrowness of opening (joc.)
CVCVC	bwáták	describes completeness in fermentation or ripening
CVCVN	bə́lə́m	flickeringly
CVNCVN	báŋbáŋ	describes doing s.t. fast,
CVCVCVC	də́fə́lə́k	describes s.t. shallow
CVCCVCVC	də̀kzə́rə̀k	describes s.t. small but beautiful
CVCVCVCV	bóríbórí	describes softness
CVCCVCVN	dátkúlúŋ	very near
CVCCVNVN	də̀pfínyàŋ	very little

All these canonical shapes are attested throughout the Tarok lexicon, and there appears to be nothing in the phonology, tone or morphology of Tarok ideophones that distinguish them from other words. Intriguingly, no Tarok ideophones begin with vowels, although there are some common adverbs with that shape, for example;

adók	again
azhén	last year
ìɓótàk	early morning
ìsú	on the spot

V- prefixes are ususally indicative of nouns in Tarok and it seems likely that these atypical forms all have their source in nominalisations. There are a restricted number of examples in Tarok where tonal differentiation marks semantically related forms. For example;

bwáták   describes completeness in fermentation or ripening

ngwanda	mi	yal	pə	bwáták
pawpaw	my	ripe	adv.	completely

My pawpaw is completely ripe

bwàtàk   describes s.t. completely rotten

ngwanda	mi	mwan	pə	bwàtàk
pawpaw	my	rotten	adv.	completely

My pawpaw is completely rotten

and similarly;

dúkdúk   describes planting seeds very close together
dùkdùk   describes insisting too much on s.t.

However, such oppositions are neither common or consistent enough to be considered a rule. Tarok ideophones do;

    a) not have etymologies that can easily be discerned
    b) constitute a fixed set of forms known to all competent speakers

Tarok well illustrates the problem posed by ideophones for conventional syntactic and morphological analysis. They seem not be in regular relationships with other parts of the lexicon, their sources are unknown and their contexts of use unpredictable[5]. Indeed, if Tarok ideophones are to be distinguished from other parts of speech as a word-class it can only be through semantics, their link to sensory experience, for which the criteria will inevitably be debatable.

5. The interface with other types of 'sensory' phones

5.1 Odour terminologies

The terminology of odours is generally poorly developed in European languages. Smells are often described by analogy or terms are shared with the vocabulary of taste. This may have led to the assumption that a similar situation prevails in African languages. However, some research suggests that a much richer vocabulary of odours exists in Africa. Many languages in Africa have ophresaesthemes, words to describe very specific smells. A popular one in Nigeria/Cameroun is the 'smell of fresh dogmeat', admittedly not a common odour in European contexts. These words do not fill the same syntactic slot as ideophones and behave more like invariant nouns. Nonetheless they appear to fill the same experiential slot as ideophones. Van Beek (1992) has described the smell terminology of Kapsiki, a Chadic language of North Cameroon and situated it within the caste system. Hombert (1992) gives a summary of work on a long-term project to uncover the ophresiological terminology of the Bantu languages of Gabon. Koops (in press) describes the rich terminology of the Kuteb, a people speaking a Jukunoid language in S.E. Nigeria.

An example of the characteristics of these terms is provided by Tarok (Blench & Longtau 1995). The principal verb used in Tarok with odours is **niŋ** 'to smell' and the usual syntactic construction is similar to English. There are eighteen specific odour terms in Tarok. These are given below in Table 10 in a typical sentence-frame.

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[5] Although possibly with large text corpora, this statement would be qualified. Mark Dingemanse (p.c. and ined.) who is creating such a corpus for the Siwu language in Ghana reports on various regularities in contexts of use.

Table 10. Tarok odour terms
Adverbials

a nìŋ pə shíníní	it smells damp. Applied to body, snake, dog meat (only) and insects
a nìŋ pə shàw	it smells of snakes. In-between good and bad (some kinds of snakes and scent)
a nìŋ pə gə̀mə̀r	it smells pleasant (applied to perfumes, meat, soups, fruits)
a nìŋ pə vòndòŋ	it smells very bad (faeces, rotten eggs or malt, dry herbal concoction burnt to drive out spirits)
a nìŋ gòndòŋ	it smells x (a neutral word determined by context)

Reduplicated verbs

a nìŋ shíshì	it smells burnt
a nìŋ ɓíɓə́ŋ	it smells bad
a nìŋ vuvón	it smells rotten (egg or wet flour paste)
a nìŋ cìcàŋ	it smells sweet (any good smell)
a nìŋ múmwán	it smells 'off' (but not so bad that it can't be eaten)
a nìŋ vivyàp	it smells spoilt (general; past the point of edibility)
a nìŋ sìsám	it smells sour (fermented, such as overnight porridge or old beer)

Nominalisations

a nìŋ abírə́ŋ	it smells of cinders
a nìŋ ǹgù	it smells smoky
a nìŋ apìr$^+$	it smells of fire
a nìŋ azhám	it smells damp (things other than **shíníní**)
a nìŋ ǹdìŋ	it smells of water
a nìŋ ìvə́r	it smells of rain

In contrast to ideophones, the etymological base of nearly all these terms is easily identified, either through nominalisation or reduplication of a verb root. Only some of the adverbials have no clear origin.

Odour terms in African languages constitute another problematic case, similar to ideophones. They usually are invariant, fill a particular syntactic slot, are not necessarily phonaesthemes, but do relate to sensory experience in the same way. Needless to say, the literature on such terms is still very sparse and they rarely enter into the world of conventional grammars.

5.2 Body image terms

Across Central Nigeria, many Plateau and neighbouring languages have what may be called 'insultatives'. These are invariant adjectives that qualify specific body parts and are only used in insults or jocular remarks. They do not necessarily resemble other ideophones morphologically in languages where this is marked and do not show concord in languages where other adjectives do. Nonetheless, they otherwise appear to fall into the same experiential class as ophresaesthemes and similar sensory terms.

The ɛBoze language, an East Kainji language spoken west of Jos in Central Nigeria appears to be particularly rich in these terms. Table 11 shows a sample of the humorous terms applied to fat ('stout') people in ɛBoze;

Table 11. ɛBoze sensory terms applied to fat people

ɛBoze	Sense
bompuru	describes a fat, shapeless person
bodondoro(ŋ)	describes a person who is naked and shapeless
Borondos!	exclamation at the sight of a hefty person
gadarse	describes a stout person
galafangalafan	describes the way a stout person walks
gargadaŋ	describes a huge person
gbaŋfan	describes a stout person or large object
gərdəng	describes a stout person

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εBoze	Sense
golshon	describes a stout person
kontoso	describes a stout person
kwagaga	describes s.t. or s.o. who is tall and shapeless
lukuluku	describes a person that looks young, healthy, and fairly fat
makki	describes a short, fat and heavy person or load
mologoso	describes a giant person
nanaru	describes sitting position of fat person on the floor
pesekele	describes a naked, fat person
posokolo	describes pot-bellied person
sangaran	describes a tall shapeless being
songorong	describes a tall and shapeless being
turgusu	describes a fairly fat and good looking woman
vingarən	describing the movement of a fat person
zoote	describes a fat and tall being

Apart from **galafangalafan** all these words are invariant adjectives, or in one case an exclamation, and they have no obvious etymologies. The only outstanding morphophonemic feature of these words is that they always conserve the same vowel throughout, and that front vowels are apparently excluded. εBoze has a system of underspecified vowels in prefixes which show harmony with the stems, but this set of words is still highly atypical for the language as a whole.

6. Conclusions

Our knowledge of the extent of ideophones in particular African languages is in part defective because the choice to record them reflects the worldview of the compiler of the lexicon. Our knowledge of their use is often highly inadequate, even for languages where the lexical forms have been documented, because of the way we write grammars. It is clear that ideophones can be phonotactically, morphologically or syntactically marked, but this is not a necessary requirement. It is probably better to treat them as an 'experiential' class of words, which describe and intensify a report of interactions with the sensory world. This is to acknowledge that our accounts of African languages remain hobbled by the preconceptions of the seminar room and the impoverished sensory world of European culture. Ideophones are just one word class which has remained in descriptive limbo; other related sets will need to be acknowledged.

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