

Ideophones in the languages of Nigeria and Cameroun

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Roger Blench

Kay Williamson Educational Foundation

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- It has long been known that a feature characteristic of languages worldwide, but particularly those of Africa, is ideophones, words of a distinct semantic type, which may fill one or many syntactic slots.
- Ideophones may be defined as a subset of sound symbolism, which also includes phonaesthemes and other methods of indicating qualities (for example alternations of \pm ATR vowels)
- 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
- Ideophones (or 'expressives' in Asian terminology) have begun to be of more interest to the broader scholarly community (e.g. Hinton et al, 1994).

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- 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. In many languages, ideophones have distinctive phonotactics.

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- 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 are hard 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 Welmers 1973 for comment on lacunae in research).

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But they 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. There is one intriguing exception to this, the worldwide word for 'round, circle, wheel' which is often k-l- or k-r- in many language phyla.



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■ Typical examples in English are;

- Shilly-shally (verb)
- Hocus-pocus (noun)
- Namby-pamby (adjective)
- Dingdong (onomatopoeia)
- Helter-skelter (adverb/noun)
- tell-tale (noun/adjective)
- tick-tock (onomatopoeia)
- riff-raff (noun)



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- 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 "intensitive 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.

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- It seems that ideophones are far more prevalent in Africa than in other world language phyla.
- It is hard to be sure, but lists of ideophones for other predominantly oral regions of the world seem to be remarkably short, except in parts of East Asia
- Possibly because other strategies (such as a rich repertoire of adjectives or adverbs or phonoaesthemes) substitute.
- However, language phyla also just differ and Africa may be a special case



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- In contrast, *semantically*, sensory experiences can be identified across languages and even phyla. Many African languages have ideophones describing comparable 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.



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- 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 no evidence of direct lexical borrowing; therefore it is essentially borrowing of ideas about expressivity



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- 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 some 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 not of this form
- There is probably a very general relationship between canonical structures of words in a language and the form of ideophones



Claims about ideophones

- Ideophones are not usually amenable to historical linguistics; their etymologies are generally opaque and there is little cross-language regularity.
- One intriguing question revolves around renewability and innovation. 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 that ideophones *are* a fixed pool and cannot be just 'made up'. The exception is imitations of sounds; for example new technologies require new ideophones

Claims about ideophones

- A common claim in the literature on ideophones in African languages is that these are phonologically marked. They can contain unusual consonant phonemes (less usually vowels) or sequences. They also more often contain glide tones than the ordinary lexicon
- The labio-dental flap, 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 Mambay
- Courtenay (1976) argues that phonological markedness is the case in Yoruba, as does Madugu's (1987) for Nupe. This is certainly the case for many of the southern African Bantu languages studied in detail, where specific rules of reduplication and tone-patterns abound.

Nupe ideophones showing predominance of glide tones

Nupe

fǎfǎnyí

gbǔgbǔnyí

pānyǐ

Púpûyǐ

pǔpǔyí

sǔsǔsùdà

swǎswǎgǐ

tǎtǎyí

tětěnyí

tőtöyí

tsǎgǐtsǎgǐ

Gloss

‘very (wide)’

‘gurglingly’

‘sound of a slap’

‘throb as felt in a sore finger’

‘poppingly’

‘warm, as foods’

‘tender’

‘senseless’

‘shakily’

‘flowingly’

‘little’

Claims about ideophones

- **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.**
- **As far as this can be tested, there appears to be no validity for this in the case of Tarok.**
- **Ideophones as defined here have a particular syntactic slot and cannot be easily invented and understood.**
- **This is not to deny that individuals cannot imitate, sometimes remarkably effectively, new auditory experiences. However, these are regarded as outside the language system proper.**

Specificity of sounds in Idũ

kpùùù stone falls on the ground

dzaìdzaì rain falls on the ground

cacacaca water falls on the ground

waaaa ↘ grass or leaf falling on the ground

kěngěmm sound of stone on water

Vowel oppositions denoting sound qualities in Oroko

Oroko

wáà wáà

wúù wúù

kpòó

kpéé

Glosses

moving in dry grass/ leaves'

'walking in wet grass'

'heavy branch falling'

'light branch falling'

Tonal symbolism in Mwaghavul idiophones

Mwaghavu	Gloss
bílásh	sound of a light person falling down
bìlàsh	sound of heavy person falling down in a slippery place
júm	sound of a light object falling in water
jùm	sound of a heavy object falling in water

Comparison of ideophones for similar 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	tũŋtũŋ	‘sound a free-flowing liquid pouring onto the ground’

Limbum ideophones expressing emotional states

Limbum

bàpbàp

cwèpcwèp

dòoshìdòoshì

njéṅ

ṅìṅrèṅìṅrè

tórtór

yèṅṅgèryèṅṅgèr

sense

describes a suspicious appearance

describes a person's inflated appearance

describes being intrusive

describes being aloof

describes smiling hypocritically

describes behaving in a way indifferent to others

describes suppressed anger or joy

Kolokuma terms for walking unsteadily, illustrating a consonantal frame

Kolokuma	description of
táantàantáan	‘a person walking unsteadily, as if disoriented’
tákpetàkpe	‘staggering, as a drunken man’
tálakatàlaka	‘a tottering walk on slippery or uneven ground, as if about to fall’
talakìtálakì	‘standing aloof; standing in scattered groups’
tálakpetàlakpe	‘walking on undulating ground in a hurry’
táleketàleke	‘unbalanced movement’
téetèè	‘moving aimlessly, unsteadily’
teketeké	‘unsteadily, as a toddler’
téketèke	‘tottering, as a newly walking child’
tòìtòì	‘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’

Tarok and typical claims about ideophones

- 1. They 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. have etymologies that can only very rarely be discerned
- 6. constitute a fixed set of forms known to all competent speakers
- 7. Therefore, if they are to be distinguished as a word-type it is only through semantics

The interface with other types of 'sensory' phones I

- **1. Many African languages also have ophresaesthemes, words to describe very specific smells. A popular one in Nigeria/Cameroun is the 'smell of fresh dogmeat', admittedly not common in European contexts.**
- **2. These 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.**

The interface with other types of 'sensory' phones II

- **1. Across Central Nigeria, many Plateau and neighbouring languages have what may be called 'insultatives'**
- **2. These are invariant adjectives that qualify particularly body parts and are only used in insults.**
- **3. They do not resemble ideophones morphologically in languages where this is marked and do not show concord in languages where other adjectives do.**
- **4. Nonetheless, they otherwise appear to fall into the same experiential class as ophraesaesthemes etc.**

Mwaghavul body idioms

Mwaghavul

dùghùl

Gùjùrùk

jéghérékjéghérék

koryòngkoryòng

mondòs

mondòsmondòs

rongshòng

vùkmùn

vùrmùs

vwàplàs

vyàngràghàs

English

describes s.o. who is flat footed

face with deep-set eyes or a deep hole

describes s.o. who is thin and fragile-looking

describes how people with crooked legs stand

describes the snout of a pig or a dog

describes a projecting mouth [the sense is that someone is angry but won't come out and express it, so they purse their mouth]

describes s.t. that is branching such as the horns of an antelope

describes s.t. ill-looking and dusty

describes s.t with a rounded end such as an amputated hand

describes s.t. that is oversized, such as extra-wide feet or mouth

describes a mis-shapen head

εBoze sensory terms applied to fat people

εBoze	description of
bompuru	'fat, shapeless person'
bodondoro(η)	'person who is naked and shapeless'
borondos!	'exclamation at the sight of a hefty person'
gadarse	'stout person'
galafangalafan	'the way a stout person walks'
gargadaη	'huge person'
gbaηfan	'stout person or large object'
gərdəng	'stout person'
golshon	'stout person'
kontoso	'stout person'
kwagaga	's.t. or s.o. who is tall and shapeless'
lukuluku	'person that looks young, healthy, and fairly fat'

εBoze sensory terms applied to fat people

εBoze	description of
makki	‘short, fat and heavy person or load’
mologoso	‘giant person’
nanaru	‘sitting position of fat person on the floor’
pesekele	‘naked, fat person’
posokolo	‘pot-bellied person’
sangaran	‘tall and shapeless being’
songorong	‘tall and shapeless being’
turgusu	‘fairly fat and good looking woman’
vingarən	‘movement of a fat person’
zoote	‘fat and tall being’

Mwaghavul colour intensifiers

càf extra red intensifies nààt

nààt to be red

rap¹ black, dirty, dark
(complexion)

bítbít very black intensifies tùp

tùp¹ black colour, dark, obscure

pyáá white, fair

péngpéng extremely white intensifies pyáá

pétpét extremely white intensifies pyáá

Conclusions

- Our knowledge of the extent of ideophones in particular African languages is in part because their recording reflects the worldview of the compiler of the lexicon.
- Our knowledge of their use is often highly defective even for language 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 'expressive' class, some thing which describes and intensifies the interaction with the sensory world
- and to acknowledge that African languages at least also have other related word classes which also remain in descriptive limbo