Frog Mouths and Mimesis:
An Essay on the Relationship Between
Form and Meaning

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The world lives as you live,
Speaks as you speak, a creature that
Repeats its vital words, yet balances
The syllable of a syllable.
—Wallace Stevens

Conventional scientific views of language presuppose that there are sounds and groups of sounds that humans are capable of hearing and producing to which societies attach meaning. The ordering of sounds in a syllable is subject only to physiologic constraints, and the assignment of meaning is arbitrary. Of course there are exceptions to this convention, but these are classified as marginal or paralinguistic phenomena, confined to relatively few examples and hence not considered crucial to linguistic theory generally.

To some linguists, however, the notion of an arbitrary relationship between sound and meaning feels unnatural, not because it may run contrary to universals of child language acquisition like bilabials and breast sucking, but because those linguists have experienced the feeling of "knowing" what words mean without having heard them before.

Precisely how these insights originate I will not attempt to describe in this paper, but I do propose to offer a clear-cut and undeniable example of a case in the Lao language where the relationship between sound and meaning is not arbitrary, even by scientific linguistic definition, and where the occurrence is regular and not marginal. I would maintain that this case is not isolated and that all natural language is composed of relationships that are similar in type. The example offered here is merely more dramatic; and yet it can be explained by scientific linguistics, which heretofore has tabooed the suggestion of such a coherence because it exists in the unconscious and is natural.

It seems appropriate to begin with the mouth of the frog through which I first entered the subject, in particular the mouth of Rana tigrina (replaced by Rana rugulosa in China), a large frog, similar in shape and size to the American bull frog. It is called kop in Lao and other Tai languages, pronounced with a final unaspirated, unreleased /-p/. The mouth of the frog
is wide, rounded, and slightly elongated. Viewed from the side, the line of the mouth gives the impression of being compressed or flat, giving rise to the expression *pee paan paak kop* 'as flat as a frog's mouth'. I discovered while studying the etymology of the Lao word for Tokay gekko (*Gekko gekko*), *kap kee*², that the first syllable is cognate with *kop* and that the only viable explanation for this is the shape of the gekko's mouth, which closely resembles that of the frog. It was at this point that I began to suspect that the physical character of the frog and gekko mouths were being mimicked by the word.¹

A number of other similar Lao lexemes then came to mind, *qaap* 'to close like a box turtle'; *Hap* 'to close a lid or door'; *kap* 'box'. And as I was thinking about the similarities of boxes and frog and gekko mouths, the relationship of mouth activity, closure, and the unreleased final */-p*/ became obvious; the */-p*/ brings together the jaws like a frog catching a fly or a gekko attacking a beetle. From here it is only a short mimetic journey to words with similar mandibular referents, for instance, *Khop* 'to bite'; *khaap* 'to hold in the jaws'; or *qaap*, which describes 'the act of yawning repeatedly' as in *Haaaw qaap*.

A detailed combing of Maha Sila's (1966) Lao dictionary of approximately 12,000 entries revealed that virtually all of the native Lao words (excluding Indic or Khmer borrowings) ending in */-p*/ can be shown to follow the same rule of relationship between sound and meaning. I am not sure what percentage of the Lao lexicon these words represent as there is probably not an equal distribution of final consonants, but like all Tai languages there are only ten possible finals of which */-p*/ is one. Thus, it may be shown that in ten percent of these possible syllable types for Lao, and probably the entire Tai family, the meaning is predictable from the form of the word.²

The primitive meaning of all syllables ending in */-p*/ may be stated as 'coming together', and all other meanings can be derived from this in three manifestations: as an *action*, as a *result* of the action, and as a *static form*. As an action, it includes such ideas as close, enclose, encircle, ensheath, pinch, slip, hit, compress, and step on. As a result of the action, notions

¹ For a further discussion of */kop*/ and Chinese contact words, see Chamberlain 1977: 99 ff.

² In the phonemic transcription adopted here, the high class consonant series of Lao is represented by upper case initials, and low class by lower case. For vowels I have used */e*/ for low front, */s*/ for low back, */i*/ for high back unrounded, and */a*/ for mid back unrounded. Otherwise the conventional symbols have been used. For tones, */ø*/ represents the A class, */x*/ the B class, and */x*/ the C class.

² It may be possible to make a similar association for final */-ml/, although at first glance the examples do not seem as clear-cut. But such words as */lom*² 'surround', */phoom*² 'simultaneous', */nam* 'with', */follow*, or */tam* 'to pound', do seem to display the same general range of meanings as found in words ending in final */-pl*/.
such as flatness, smoothness, pain, completion, closure, simultaneous, and tandem are indicated. And as a static form, it involves nouns such as box, frog, circle, cycle of time, and period of time.

Take, for example, words relating to the mouth: *Sop* is the word for 'lips' (in some dialects it replaces *paak*, the usual word for 'mouth'). The word for 'fish gill', which looks like a mouth, is *nçoop*. As we have already seen, *khaap* means 'to hold in the mouth' and *Khop* means 'to bite'. The word for 'to kiss' is *cuup*, especially that kissing-sucking action required to suck the insides out of freshwater snails, named appropriately *Hçoy cuup*. 'To suck in smoke' is *Suup* and 'to suck in air', particularly after eating hot peppers, is *ciip* or *Hiip*. Many other words refer to the use of the mouth for eating; *cip* is used for 'tasting with the tongue or in small sips'; *Heep* applies to 'engulfing small chunks of food', the way a duck eats, while *Suap* is used for 'eating like a pig in large greasy mouthfuls'. When a 'big fish devours a little fish', the term is *Hup*, and the same might be used for a frog eating a fly; the prey just disappears. The 'spirit that possesses a person and devours his insides' is a *Phiic pçoop*. 'Splashing large amounts of water into one's mouth with the hands' is *Huup*.

Nor is the action of the tongue to be left out, as shown by words like *leep*, 'to stick out the tongue rapidly like a snake', or *luap*, 'to lick back and forth with the tongue'. (Notice how these words begin with the lateral /l-/ as do *lia* 'lick' and *lin*² 'tongue'.)

Descriptions of sounds associated with the mouth are likewise plentiful, such as *cap cap*, the chewing sound, reminiscent of the White Tai *chep chep* with the same meaning that I take to be cognate with the Lao word *seep* 'delicious'. When pigs eat (*Suap*), the sound they make may be either *cop cop* or *kop kop*. The sound *kuap kuap* is one of 'eating crunchy things' and *kup or kup kup* is 'the sound of whisky being poured into the mouth'. The sound *kaap kaap* is that of the female duck. 'Many voices talking at the same time' is described by *khoop or khoop khoop*. A man with no nose is said to speak with *Siang Mïip*. 'A special form of singing' is *Khap*, *käisp* is 'whisper'; and 'a hoarse voice' may be either *Heep* or *saap*.

The other sensory organ involved in closures is the eye. 'To close the eyes decidedly or with finality' is *vap*; 'to close the eyes and sleep' is *Lap*. 'To blink' is *phip*, and 'to see in flashes' is *Hen map meep*, whereas 'to see in a single flash' is *Hen Lïap*. 'To close the eyes just before or almost sleeping' is *Siap taa*, and 'to very slowly close the eyes' is *soop soop*. 'A nap' may be either *niip* or *niip*; another word for 'sleeping lightly' is *koop*.

Some foods are included in the range of final /-p/ meanings as well, depending on the way they are prepared; for example, *laap* refers to 'food that is made by chopping meat', *sup* to 'food prepared by pounding certain vegetables such as beans, jackfruit, eggplant, or bamboo shoots'. 'To bake' is *top* (that is, 'heated while enclosed'), and *tup* is 'to preserve by salting or fermenting in a sealed container'.
Another aspect of 'coming together' is grasping, as in the word cap meaning 'to grasp or grab'. 'To grab something fast and hold it in the hand' is khup. 'A pinch, or to pick up a pinch of something between the thumb and forefinger' is ʔyip, but if all the fingers are used, the term is ʔyup. 'To pinch in order to hold in place' is Naap. If an instrument such as pliers or tweezers is used, the term is Niip. 'Tweezers or tongs' are called Neep. 'To grab or lift something with both hands' is Hoop or Hoop. 'To hug with both arms' is ʔoop, and 'to pin down by both arms' is naap, often used in the expression naap Khuu 'interrogate'. The word neep can also mean 'to pinch'. 'To grab a bag with a drawstring' is Hip, and khiip is 'to grab with chopsticks or two fingers'.

'Striking or hitting with the flat of the hand' is top, also used for 'clapping the hands'. A word for 'hitting with the fist' is bup. If the knuckle of the middle finger is used to knock the head, it is called Sap as in the expression Sap Maak kɔok Say⁴ Hua, literally, 'knocking the head with a hog plumb'. 'To strike with a stick' is thup; 'to beat a drum with two sticks at once' is caap, used most frequently with the kɔɔn kig, large drums suspended in pairs from bamboo tripods, perhaps originally used as war drums.

'Meeting between people' may be phop, or variously 'intentionally' cuap, 'unintentionally' khop, with a group Sop.

Other aspects of 'joining or coming together' include the conjunction kap, meaning 'and' or 'with'. The word kip means 'to bring two things close together'; kup refers to 'jamming together', as with herds of buffaloes; kɔɔp is 'to bring both hands together to form a cup'; and Khaap, nop, and nɔɔp all refer to 'bringing the palms of the hands together as in prayer, greeting, or as a sign of respect'. 'Close-fitting or tight' is khap. Measurements that are made by stretching and bringing together the thumb and forefinger or the thumb and middle finger are called khiip and khuip, respectively. The same action when used for locomotion by inch worms or land leeches is variously kədiip, kədip, kədup, kədeep, kədeep, usually reduplicated. The word khuup refers to the back bone where it joins the neck, and khup and khuap both mean 'to bring together'.

Bringing together also implies completeness, hence such items as cup or cop meaning 'to be finished or completed', no doubt giving rise to cop which means 'good or nice', as completeness implies goodness. The word khop means 'complete', and nap means 'to count', that is, 'to establish completeness or to make sure something is all there'.

Cycles are likewise forms of completeness, both pictorially and chronologically, as in hɔɔp, 'a cycle', or Khuaap, 'an annual cycle'. Khɔɔp is a 'circular boundary'; khɔɔp means 'to surround or to complete a cycle'; and Kheep is 'to be enclosed within a circular boundary'. 'To curve or bend around and come together at the ends to form a circle' is kɔɔp. The word liap refers to 'walking around or circumambulating in order to watch over',

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