EXPRESSIVE PHONOLOGY AND PROSAIC PHONOLOGY
IN MON-KHMER

G. Diffloth
University of Chicago

Many Mon-Khmer languages have a basic part of speech which has no equivalent in the classical system inherited from the Graeco-Latin tradition. The terms "phonaesthetic words" (Henderson, 1965), "impressifs" (Durand, 1961), "descriptive words" (SIL linguists, passim), to mention but a few, have been used in the past to label this word class; and Vietnamese linguists divide it into two categories: tướng thanh ("sound-imitative") and tướng hình ("form-imitative"). In a previous study, I have called these words "expressives" (Diffloth, 1972), by reference to Jakobson (1966), who was following Pierce in equating expressive meaning with iconicity.

In languages of the European subcontinent, iconicity is also found, but it is often weak and unpredictably scattered, leading a Bengali friend of mine to remark about the prosaic flavor of these languages. Because of this weakness, many linguists are ill at ease with iconicity, and no models have been devised to describe it. And even in languages where it is quite prominent, western investigators simply ignored the annoying fact, as in the case of Sre, for instance. There are exceptions however: Henderson, in her work on Khasi, has always confronted the issue with an even mind, and I would like to follow her example here.

As a general point, I would like to say that iconicity is a basic mode of meaning, and that it is especially clear and concentrated in the word class of Expressives. By studying this word class, we may develop methods and devise models for describing iconicity, and we may then show exactly how pervasive iconicity is in the rest of the language, for example in syntax.

If this claim can be supported in a convincing way, it could have wide repercussions, not only in the small field of Mon-Khmer studies, but in linguistic theory as a whole, and especially in its recent developments. Generative semanticists construct underlying representations which are more and more different from phonetic surface representations, and thus more and more abstract as they approach the status of semantic representations. This dislocating, which seems legitimate for describing what Pierce called symbolic, or conventional meaning, is at loggerheads with the very principle of iconicity which relies on a commonness of form and meaning.
It is in fact, as well as in principle, impossible to describe iconic patterns with a generative semantic approach, or indeed with any variant model which uses rewrite rules as the main descriptive device, as I pointed out some time ago (Diffloth, 1972).

In order to describe Expressives and other iconic phenomena in language, it will be necessary to create an Aesthetic Component of grammar, distinct from, but imbricated into, the logico-phonological component which has been the sole preoccupation of generativists. Adding a whole new component may well disrupt the imposing elegance and simplicity of the generative semantic model, but language does have many facets, and an adequate model must somehow reflect this diversity.

The theoretical stakes are therefore quite high, and the arguments should be accordingly compelling. Unfortunately, the data available today on Expressives is poor, and we do not even have methods for establishing with certainty the presence of iconicity. And while any person who uses or works with Mon-Khmer Expressives soon acquires a sensitivity to their iconic patterns, it would be good to find ways of convincing the sceptic and the tepid.

I am not sure this can be done at the moment, but in this paper, I would like to draw attention to certain easily observable phonological peculiarities of Mon-Khmer Expressives, which are best explained by appealing to the notion of iconicity. This will constitute but one line of evidence in the broader argument that iconicity is the very raison d'être of the whole word class called Expressive.

I will consider three distantly related Mon-Khmer languages: Khasi, Sre and Semai, where Expressives are very numerous and easy to identify formally by their particular morphology.

When we describe the phonology of these languages, we find that many statements made about the phonology of prosaic, i.e. non-expressive words, have to be modified when applied to Expressives. In other words, we seem to have two distinct but overlapping phonological systems: a Prosaic phonology and an Expressive phonology; and while the differences have sometimes been noted, they have not been shown to be the work of iconicity.

According to that kind of explanation, every pattern found in Expressive phonology and absent in Prosaic phonology should have iconic value, and should be found in particular Expressives with precisely that value. One of the converse propositions would be that phonological patterns which are found in Prosaic but not in Expressive phonology should have no iconic value at all in the aesthetic system of that language. I have no good evidence for the second, but will try to exemplify here the first of these two predictions. For Khasi and Sre, I will only indicate some of the phonological differences, and for Semai, I will
try, in addition, to explain them through iconicity..

Khasi Expressives have been identified and included in the cate-
gory of Adverbs by both Rabel ("proper adverbs", 1961 p. 63) and Henderson
("phonaesthetic adverbs", 1976a). One of their morphological properties
is reduplication, either in full form, e.g.:

ŋii ʔewc ʔɔŋ-ʔɔŋ la ka rií "we love our country very dearly"
where the Expressive ʔɔŋ-ʔɔŋ is said to mean "dearly, intensely (love)"
y by Nissor Singh (1902), but was explained to me by young native Khasi
as referring to the beats of the heart, in clearly iconic fashion;
or in modified form:

ki ŋu bu? ʔŋrum-ʔŋram ya ki deen "they just store the timber care-
lessly" where the Expressive ʔŋrum-ʔŋram means: "carelessly, in such a
way as to obstruct the passage". But there may well be other productive
morphemes. The very idiosyncratic sound-meaning associations noted by
Rabel-Heyman (1976), should not, I think, be considered morphemes in the
usual sense, but iconic elements of the aesthetic system of Khasi Ex-
pressives. Normal morphemes, although not necessarily productive, should
have sufficiently abstract meanings to be applicable throughout a given
word class.

In her penetrating article on Khasi initial clusters, Henderson
(1976b) drew the distinction between accidental and systematic gaps in
Khasi phonology, but she starts with the warning: "many of the permitted
combinations are exclusively, or almost exclusively, reserved for fami-
lies of expressive words with a phonaesthetic function", and she later
amends most of her phonological statements by remarks along the same
line. At least one exceptional pattern of this kind is clearly iconic
and has been noted by both Henderson (1965) and Rabel-Heyman (1976):
the presence of final -k. The original final *-k inherited from Proto-
Mon-Khmer has turned to -ʔ in Khasi (e.g. ʔSNuʔ "hair", thiaʔ "to sleep"),
but in Expressives we find numerous examples of Khasi final -k:

kʰək "(stopping) abruptly"
kɾək "(sparkling) suddenly"
kʰnək-kʰnək "(walking) with a limp"
tŋuk-tŋok "(jostling) roughly"

These words describe sensations which have an abrupt or forceful ending,
like that of the sound -k in Khasi. A final -ʔ would also be abrupt, but
more sparing in muscular activity. Whether or not this is the basis for
iconicity here will have to be decided on more abundant and systematic
evidence.
Sre, of the Bahnaric branch, has a well defined word class of Expressives, although the fact is ignored in Manley's book (1966), and in other descriptions of Sre which I have seen. From the available dictionaries (Dournes, 1950; Drouin and K'naï, 1962), it is possible to extract the characteristic affixes which define the class of Expressives. Since these have never been described, I will list here the more frequent and obvious morphemes, and, whenever possible, their meanings. Like other words in the language, Expressives have either monosyllabic roots: \((C_i) C_mV C_f\), or disyllabic roots: \(C_i V C_m V C_f\) where the minor vowel \(v\) is either /ə/, a vocalic liquid or a vocalic nasal.

1) Reduplication

Full reduplication is only found in monosyllabic roots:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{wiw-wiw} & \quad \text{"denying movements of the head"} \\
\text{bleep-bleep} & \quad \text{"licking movements"}
\end{align*}
\]

In disyllabic roots, only the final \(C_mV C_f\) portion of the root is reduplicated and prefixed:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{məm-dəməm} & \quad \text{"being absorbed (in eating)"} \\
\text{ŋəə-ŋəŋə} & \quad \text{"in slanted patterns"} \\
\text{pəh-səpəh} & \quad \text{"seriously, not half-way"}
\end{align*}
\]

2) Reduplication and replacement by initial \(r-\):

For both types of roots, only the \(V C_f\) portion of the root is reduplicated and prefixed as \(V C_f\), and \(C_m\) is replaced by \(r-\):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{riw-wiw} & \quad \text{"denying movements"} \\
\text{ruu-nəuun} & \quad \text{"many swellings"} \\
\text{rəc-grəc} & \quad \text{"(eating) a lot"} \\
\text{rik-mhik} & \quad \text{"softened (earth)"}
\end{align*}
\]

But in case \(C_f\) is an \(-r\), \(C_m\) is replaced by \(l-\) instead of \(r-\):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{lii-r-ciir} & \quad \text{"brilliant (fire)"} \\
\text{leer-mheer} & \quad \text{"(sniffing) carefully"}
\end{align*}
\]

this peculiar property of roots with final \(-r\) has the effect of avoiding the creation of initial \(rV'r-\) syllables which are excluded in the whole of Sre phonology, whether Expressive or Prosaic.