A WILLY-NILLY LOOK AT LAI IDEOPHONES*

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INTRODUCTION: THE SUBJECT OF STUDY

This is an investigation into an unusual type of lexeme in Lai Chin, the ideophone. Similar items in other languages have gone by other names elsewhere: "expressives" in Semai (Diffloth 1976, 1979), as well as "phonaesthetic words" (Henderson 1965), "impressifs" (Durand 1961), and "descriptive words" (various SIL linguists).[1] They have three characteristics setting them apart as a class. First, and most salient, is their partially reduplicative phonology, e.g. *hlua?-ma?, phik-phek, tler-tlur, fiip-fiap*. Details of their phonological shape will be given below.

Second is a semantic property: they provide vivid imagery which adds, for lack of a better term, "flavor" to an utterance. This (along with minor phonological differences) sets them apart from some superficially similar general intensifying adverbs such as *hriŋ-hren* and *hrim-hrim*. It also distinguishes them from everyday adverbs, which add less richness to verb meaning, instead fulfilling functions such as intensification (e.g., *kaw* 'AFFIRMATIVE', *tuk* 'extremely', *tak-tak* 'very', *ŋaay* 'very'), aspectual or temporal specification (e.g., *deeŋ-maaŋ* 'about to', *leŋ-maŋ* 'continually',[2] *tsia* 'already', *tsho?l* 'immediately', *duak* 'immediately'), or related semantic functions which, while providing important semantic detail, lack the richness of imagery associated with ideophones. An epiphenomenon of the generality of these ordinary adverbs is that they can co-occur with a wide range of verbs, while ideophones, due to their semantic specificity, are more selective with respect to their co-occurrence partners.

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[1] The last three terms and references are taken from Diffloth 1979:49.

[2] Both *deeŋ-maaŋ* and *leŋ-maŋ* fit the phonological pattern of ideophones, but will not be treated as such, since they do not meet the semantic criterion of providing rich imagery, and since they can co-occur with a wide range of verbs.

Third, ideophones form a syntactic class of their own. While their canonical behavior is adverb-like, in that they tend to occur post-verbally, they may also appear post-nominally, which is adjective-like behavior. And in some limited syntactic contexts, they even behave nominally, appearing between circumfixed demonstratives and before adjectives.

The structure of this essay is as follows. There are two major sections. The first contains introductory information and examples. Second is the bulk of the paper, which includes examples of all the ideophones found. The first major section is divided into subsections. First I offer some canonical examples of ideophones, in an attempt to convey some of the feel of how they are used. Second is a discussion of similar phenomena in other languages. Next comes a description of the methodology employed in elicitation. Fourth is a detailed discussion of the phonological properties of Lai ideophones. This will provide us with a useful division into two major subclasses of ideophone. Fifth and finally, as justification for treating ideophones as a separate syntactic class, I will demonstrate some non-adverbial usages.

The second major section—the data—requires coming up with some form of taxonomy. The major subdivision is based on the aforementioned phonological subclasses. Within each subclass I will present examples in roughly alphabetical order by ideophone (back /ʈ/ alphabetizes after front /t/; glottal stop comes after /z/), mentioning particulars about the scene described and pointing out any peculiarities. Finally I will propose some broad consonant-based sound-symbolic classifications.

Given this format, it is inevitable that some examples will be repeated. I have tried to minimize such cases.

IDEOPHONES: SOME EXAMPLES

The following convey some of the basic flavor of Lai ideophones:

(1) ʔa-vun   ʔa-naal   tsiŋ-tseŋ
     3SG.POSS-skin   3SG.S-smooth   IDEO
     'Her skin is flawlessly smooth.'

(2) tii   ʔa-fiaŋ   vir-ver
     water   3SG.S-clear   IDEO
     'The water is extremely clear.'

(3) saay   ʔa-naal   zuaʔ-maʔ
     elephant   3SG.S-slip   IDEO
     'The elephant slipped (in a large, cumbersome way).'

(4)   ?a-?oo   ?a-thuum   dek-duk

       3SG.POSS-voice   3SG.S-guttural   IDEO

       'His voice is deep and booming.'

As should be evident from the translations, the ideophones add rich semantic detail to the verb.   In these canonical cases, it is hard to disentangle the semantics of the verb from the semantics of the ideophone, since most ideophones co-occur with very few verbs, sometimes only one.

SIMILAR PHENOMENA IN OTHER LANGUAGES

Tiddim Chin, closely related to Lai Chin, has something similar, which Peri Bhaskararao (1989) calls "chiming adverbs."   What is most similar is the partial-reduplicative phonology, along with the sound-symbolic value of vowels, to be described in more detail later. The semantic function is also quite similar, in that each chiming adverb carries with it a great deal of imagery, adding semantic richness to the scene described. Indeed, my consultant, Ken Van-Bik, has almost invariably described ideophones in terms of "imagery." He would often say, for instance, "the image is of . . .".

G. Diffloth (1976, 1979) has identified "expressives" in some Mon-Khmer languages, most notably Semai.   Again, we have (sometimes partial) reduplication and rich semantic detail.   Also like Lai, the verb semantics and expressive semantics are often hard to separate.   For instance, Diffloth's English glosses of expressives often contain the verb parenthetically, as in:

kʰnɔk-kʰnɔk '(walking) with a limp'

tŋuk-tŋɔk '(jostling) roughly' (1979:51)

While our English system is not nearly as rich as those of Lai Chin, Tiddim Chin, or Semai, we seem to have at least a few instances of something similar, e.g., *roly-poly*, *ticky-tack*, and *topsy-turvy*. In addition, several of the essays on sound symbolism in Hinton, Nichols, and Ohala 1994b—in particular the essays by Aoki, Childs, Diffloth, Hamano, Langdon, and Matisoff—deal with similar-looking phenomena in a broad range of other languages spanning numerous language families.   I situate the present study within this growing body of literature on sound symbolism, especially reduplicative sound symbolism.

Finally, I should point out what type of sound symbolism is at work in Lai ideophones. These are not onomatopoeia, or, to use the Japanese term, *giongo*; instead, they are *gitaigo*: they imitate an "attitude" more than a sound.

METHODOLOGY

Ken and I employed three different methodologies. The first, suggested by Ken, was to find ideophones in the Lai translation of the Bible. Ken had a strong intuition that coming up with examples would be difficult, since ideophone usage is often particular to a given situation. So we collected a number of examples from various parts of the Bible.

Second, I suggested we work from a list of ideophones prepared by David Van-Bik (Ken's father), having Ken come up with sample sentences. This proved to be the least useful methodology. Ken found it very difficult to work from ideophone to sentence.

James Matisoff then suggested a third method: start with a semantic notion and see if Ken could think of a corresponding ideophone and example. I brainstormed for various semantic notions, such as hardness, wetness, size, loudness, etc., and, for each one, asked Ken if he could think of a corresponding ideophone and sample sentence. This was by far the most fruitful methodology, yielding a significant majority of the examples.

I am, evidently, not the only investigator to encounter difficulty in eliciting ideophones. Diffloth (1979) has written of his own difficulties in eliciting Semai expressives:

> An initial attempt has been made at describing the iconic mechanisms of Semai Expressives, but it should be evident that there are serious problems in the semantic area: while some Expressives are well established in the speech community, and have become clichés of sorts, which any speaker can explain with precision, others are more personal and idiosyncratic. Many Expressives are created on the spur of the moment, and their meaning is tied to a fleeting sensation which arose on a certain occasion. This creativity relies on iconic principles shared by all speakers and insuring communication. But when such Expressives are abstracted from the particular situation where they arose, they may only have a very vague semantic content. This problem was summarised for me by an English-speaking Semai who said that these were not real words, but rather "action-words," adding: "we just fire them." (55-56)

Childs (1994) reports about African ideophones that:

> The semantics of ideophones are indeed problematic, but it is a criterion often invoked. Ideophones often simply underscore the meaning of a verb . . . In traditional elicitation sessions, native speakers will have great difficulty in explaining the meaning of an ideophone, especially if it is