

SOUND SYMBOLISM AND KHASI ADVERBS

Lili Rabel-Heymann

Khasi, a language of the Austro-Asiatic language family and spoken by about 300,000 speakers in the State of Meghalaya (formerly Western Assam), displays a fascinating array of verb qualifying adverbs. They fall into two classes, general adverbs and proper adverbs (Rabel 1961, p.63). General adverbs, which are few in number, occur with many different verbs: *bha good, well, no? away, ?e? very*, as in *snew bha to feel well, le? no? to go away, klet no? to forget completely, lngo? ?e? to be very much surprised*. Proper adverbs act like satellites to a limited number of verbs only. These are the adverbs under discussion in this paper. Some verbs have a large number of satellite adverbs, others have only one or two. The number of adverbs seems to depend on the frequency of the verb itself. *kren to speak* has 77 adverbs, *yaa? to go* 66, and *le? to do* has 150. The adverbs of *le?* can be subdivided into those indicating the effects of mental states and feelings on the bodily features (38), dress and movements (61), cleanliness, thrift and extravagance (14), disposition of mind and character (37) (Bareh p.64 ff).

Since it would lead too far to demonstrate 150 examples I will use *?iw to smell* with its 15 satellites as an illustration.

?iw bi? to have an aromatic sweet smell

?iw hek to be smelly

?iw jlep to smell of rotten fish

?iw jli to smell nauseating

?iw krteŋ to have a smell of a thing bearing that name

?iw khon to have an unpleasant smell

?iw lhop to smell close and stuffy

?iw li to smell of fresh fish

?iw lngaaw to have the smell of a long unoccupied house

- ?iw pdu to have a slightly bad smell
 ?iw riem to have a very bad smell
 ?iw sit to smell of urine
 ?iw sien to have a pungent smell
 ?iw sma to have a rotten smell
 ?iw tun to stink

Could it be possible that the vowel *i* in the only two pleasant smells has any significance? or that the initial cluster *ji-* in *jlep* and *jli* denotes any similarity in meaning?

In preparing cards for my Khasi dictionary I noticed that adverbs - and even some verbs - of related meanings began with the same consonant clusters. The idea came to mind that certain sounds actually symbolized certain meanings in adverbs, and I began to assemble and classify initial consonant clusters according to large and not too narrowly defined semantic territories. There seem to be more Khasi adverbs with initial *j* and *l* than with any other sound; I therefore tabulated all adverbs with *j-* and *l-*, adding adverbs with *k-* for a more complete sampling.

I am herewith presenting my material which shall serve to illustrate a theory and not to prove a fact. I will indicate counter-evidence in appropriate places and will caution against too much confidence in my theory.

Sound symbolism works in more than one way: vowels in the adverb's major syllable (Rabel 1961 p.20) reflect the size of the person or object described by the adverb; these vowel values are quite predictable and can be compared to associating the *i*-vowel in the Germanic languages with smallness (teeny-weeny, itsy-bitsy, nitty-gritty) or Italian adjectival suffixes in *-ino*, *-one*, *-accio* and *-uccio*.

In the limited corpus chosen for this paper certain initial consonants or consonant clusters may relate to shape, position, protrusion, movement, noise, speed, and unpleasantness.

SHAPE. Adverbs whose first syllable begins with liquid + nasal are especially prominent in their designation of a person's or an object's shape.

- lmoñ* out short (of small things)
lmuñ out short (of big things)
lman-lman fleshy (of a young baby)
lmum-lmum fleshy and plump (of an adult)
lme? young looking inspite of old age

From these five examples one could isolate a morpheme *lm-* and assign a meaning '*short and fleshy*' to it. Further examples permit a more detailed morpheme *lmmVC*¹:

Immaŋ without ornament, cut off

Immen hands without fingers, feet without toes, cut off.

The foregoing examples are contradicted by *Immu' branch with green leaves* which seems to imply *with projections intact* so that I must revise *Imm-* to mean *with respect to projections or extensions*.

From *Imphooñ smooth and small* and *Imphuñ smooth and big* one can isolate *Imph-* with a semantic designation *smooth*. The morpheme *lŋ'VC* is exemplified by *lŋ'an short and stout*, *lŋ'ien with hands on hips like a fat man*, and *lŋ'ur like a big circle*. These three examples together with the noun *ka lŋ'uñ circumference* would allow me to assign a meaning 'of roundish proportions' to the morpheme. Unfortunately, I have an item that does not fit semantically, *lŋ'u' to be full of fire and smoke* and perhaps I have to withdraw *lŋ'VC*.

l'VC round and short derives from *l'añ squat (persons)*, *l'ar short and round*, and *l'ooñ beautifully round*. *lkVC plump and squat* derives from *lker-lker pulpy, flabby*, *lkur-lkur nice and plump*, *lkay plump*, and *lkut short and square like a log*. (*lko to fall apart* would not fit this morpheme formula and therefore presents no counter-evidence.) *lkhVC like a lonely left-over piece* derives from *lkhaŋ lonely and helpless*, *lkhaay to be tender (of meat)*, *lkhoj like a lonely little piece left over*, *lkhuŋ like a good solid piece left over*, and *ki lkhit small and useless things*.

POSITION. An object, and sometimes a person or an animal, may be lying, standing, hanging or trailing:

*yeŋ kryep or kryap standing like a diseased fowl*²

yeŋ krŋaŋ stand like a truant boy

šoŋ krŋoŋ stand like a modest little boy

šoŋ krnaay stand in the same place

krpaŋ aside, separately

bha briw khrwan khrwe' be tall and handsome in stature.

We could isolate *kry-*, *krŋ-*, *kryn-*, *krp-*, and *khrw-* as morphemes 'in a standing position' because *krw-* and *krs-* do not refer to standing, so that we cannot call the minor syllable *kr-* by itself a morpheme.

kntep cowardly, i.e. with drooping tail like a frightened fox or dog. *kntar*, *kntup* and *knteer* all refer to *a way of standing cowardly like a frightened fox or dog with a drooping tail*, so that *kntVC* can be called *standing cowardly*.

knthew with a long tail, in ragged clothes, *knthay beautifully dressed with the boh-khaila flowing*, and *knthem flourishing an over-lapping dhoti* can be grouped under *knthVC standing or walking with something trailing*.³

knji? *raised on tiptoe*, knjiŋ *on tiptoe*, knjoŋ *high up on the top*, and knjoñ and knjuoñ *aloft* clearly contain a morpheme knjVC with the meaning *raised up*. This morpheme could perhaps be incorporated into knnVt *like a bird's uplifted tail* as illustrated by knnit *lifted up like a bird's tail*, knnet, knnut *with a long and pointed tail of a big bird*.

In all the foregoing examples the minor syllable kn- alone cannot be isolated because of its high frequency as the first syllable in countless nouns and verbs with unrelated meanings.

There are three possible morphemes for *in a hanging or dangling position*, krdVC, ldVC, and lJVŋ: den *to wear* is used with krdat *dangling*, krdot *hanging like a small ball*, and krduŋ *like a swollen earlobe*, krdaap *as if wearing something hanging*, krdeep *as if wearing an old coat*. nat *to fall into, to be caught in a snare* is used with ldat *hanging upside down*, ldet *dangling like a dead bird*, and ldit *dangling like a small bird*. sdien *to hang* is used with lday *dangling like a parrot*, ldoy *hanging like a small ball*, and lduy *hanging like a heavy ball*. sdien is also used with ljiŋ, ljeŋ, ljaŋ, ljoŋ, and ljuŋ all meaning *hanging down without touching the ground*.

knrVC could be glossed with *horns*: yeŋ knram or knrem means *to stand with horns or moustache ends pointing in opposite directions* and yeŋ knreŋ *stand with long horns (like a stag or bull)*.

lbVC apparently means *with flesh exposed* from ka lboŋ *the thigh*, lbiŋ *fleshy and big*, lbaŋ *with trousers rolled up*, lboj and lbuj *short and naked*, and lbew *naked*.

lŋkCVC means *to lie flat on the ground* deriving from lŋkraŋ and lŋkreŋ *lying on the back like a drunkard*, thia? lkdaŋ *lying helpless on the back*, lŋknap, kŋkniap, lŋknep *lying thin and flat like a coin*, and ka lŋknep *the surface area*.

PROTRUSION. kntir *with a small tail*, knton *like a small hill* and kntoy *like a small protruberance* can be united under kntVC *protruding*.

SPEED. I found two examples where the final sounds could be isolated as possible morphemes CCek and CCoŋ both with the meaning *suddenly*: baam klek *to eat suddenly*, phrnaay kreŋ *to sparkle suddenly*, yeŋ kheŋ *to stop abruptly*, and jlek *at once*. Further, mi? phŋoŋ or mi? jmoŋ *to appear suddenly*. Since such morpheme structures do not fit into the overall language pattern I will dismiss these examples as accidental.

NOISE. Only two examples can be united under k[h]rVC⁴ *with a crash*: klloŋ khram *to fall with a crash* and kram-kram, krum, krim *with a crash*.

lnthVC has the meaning *destroy by throwing noisily* derived from lnthem *throw with stones*, lntheer *throw with stones continuously*, and lnthaaw *smash to pieces*.