SOUND SYMBOLISM AND KHASI ADVERBS

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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 sñew bha to feel well, le° no° to go away, klet no° to forget completely, leñø° ?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, yaaj 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 krteq to have a smell of a thing bearing that name
?iw khoq to have an unpleasant smell
?iw lhop to smell close and stuffy
?iw li to smell of fresh fish
?iw lñaaw to have the smell of a long unoccupied house

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?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 tuq to stink

Could it be possible that the vowel i in the only two pleasant smells has any significance? or that the initial cluster jl- 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.

lmoo out short (of small things)
lmoo out short (of big things)
Im-an-Iman fleshy (of a young baby)
Imum-Imum fleshy and plump (of an adult)
Ime? 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 lmVVC^2:
Imman without ornament, cut off
Immen hands without fingers, feet without toes, cut off.
The foregoing examples are contradicted by Immus 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 ImphoRN smooth and small and ImphoRN smooth and big one can
isolate Imph- with a semantic designation smooth. The morpheme ImVC
is exemplified by Inan short and stout, Inien with hands on hips like
a fat man, and Invar like a big circle. These three examples together
with the noun ka Inun circumference would allow me to assign a meaning
'of roundish proportions' to the morpheme. Unfortunately, I have an
item that does not fit semantically, Inva to be full of fire and smoke
and perhaps I have to withdraw InVC.

InVC round and short derives from Inan squat (persons), Inar short
and round, and Inoon beautifully round. InVC plump and squat derives
from Inker-ker pulpy, flabby, Inkur-kur nice and plump, Inkay plump, and
Inku short and square like a log. (Inko to fall apart would not fit this
morpheme formula and therefore presents no counter-evidence.) InkVC
like a lonely left-over piece derives from InkaRN lonely and helpless,
Inkhay to be tender (of meat), Inkho like a lonely little piece left
over, Inkhu like a good solid piece left over, and Inkhit small and
useless things.

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

- Yen kryep or kryap standing like a diseased foul
- Yen kran standing like a truant boy
- Zon kroq standing like a modest little boy
- Zon kramaay stand in the same place
- Kran aside, separately
- Bha brrw khrwan khrwe be tall and handsome in stature.

We could isolate kry-, kro-, krn-, 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 kntee 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.

Kntew with a long tail, in ragged clothes, knthe beautifuly
dressed with the boh-khaila flowing, and kntewm flourishing an over-
lapping dhoti can be grouped under knthVC standing or walking with
something trailing.
knji? raised on tiptoe, knjığ on tiptoe, knjoon high up on the top, and knjoon and knjoon aloft clearly contain a morpheme knjVC with the meaning raised up. This morpheme could perhaps be incorporated into kñvt 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, ldtVC, and ljjv: deq to wear is used with krdat dangling, krdot hanging like a small ball, and krdut like a swollen earlobe, krdap as if wearing something hanging, krdpep as if wearing an old coat. qat 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. sden to hang is used with lday dangling like a parrot, lday hanging like a small ball, and lduy hanging like a heavy ball. sden is also used with ljîq, ljêq, ljao, ljôq, and ljûq all meaning hanging down without touching the ground.

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

lbVC apparently means with flesh exposed from ka lboq the thigh, lbiq fleshy and big, lbaoq with trousers rolled up, lboj and lbuj short and naked, and lbew naked.

lôkCVC means to lie flat on the ground deriving from lôkram and lôkreeq lying on the back like a drunkard, this? lôkdaq lying helpless on the back, lôknap, lôkniap, lôknep lying thin and flat like a coin, and ka lôknep the surface area.

PROTRUSION. kntr with a small tail, kntron 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 CÇeK and CÇoq both with the meaning suddenly: baam klek to eat suddenly, phnaay krek to sparkle suddenly, yen khek to stop abruptly, and jlek at once. Further, mi? phoq or mi? jmoq 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]rVC with a crash: kllon 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.