

ICONICITY OF VOWEL QUALITIES IN NORTHEASTERN THAI REDUPLICATED WORDS

Theraphan L. Thongkum
Chulalongkorn University

1. Introduction

Several types of reduplication in languages spoken in Southeast Asia have been reported by Haas (1942 and 1946), Banker (1964), Smith (1973), Diffloth (1976 and also in this book) and Jacob (in this book). The use of reduplication is also common in the Isan dialects, i.e., the Thai dialects spoken in the northeastern region of Thailand. Reduplicated words are normally used as intensifiers and pluralisers. The iconic value of vowel qualities in reduplicated words are of particular interest.

Firth (1930) draws to our attention the relationship between vowel qualities and their suggestive meanings. He states:

When the consonantal link is etymemic or phonaesthetic, vocalic heterophony will also have some sort of function. Vowel variation in otherwise similar phonetic sequences is a common verbal device in English and other Germanic languages--e.g. drink, drank, drunk, sink, sank, sunk. ... Vowel variation is widely used for other purposes in most Germanic languages. We sometimes vary the vowels to suit in some way the varied aspects of similar actions--e.g. the verbs drip, drop, droop. Why i should suit the first sort of action and oo the third, it is possible to guess--but we must beware of sound symbolism...

The use of reduplication, of ee and oo sounds, and the liquid l r n m sounds as intensives, as diminutives associated with reiteration, or with affectionate, or pejorative feelings or regard for the picturesque, will account for much of what is loosely called onomatopoeia.¹

The iconicity of vowel qualities in Isan reduplicated words may be used as evidence to support Firth's interesting comments on sound symbolism. The analysis in this article, which is based on the Muaong Sam Sip dialect (MSS) spoken in Ban Bua Yang, Tambon Dum Yai, Amphoe Muang Sam Sip in Ubon Rachathani Province, and the many examples of reduplication found in the Isan-Central Thai Dictionary by Somdet Phramaha Wirawong Titsamahathera, et al. (1972) and also Nimmanahaeminda

(1976) strongly suggest that the phenomenon described is quite widespread among Isan and other Tai dialects spoken in the northeastern part of Thailand.²

2. A brief phonological sketch of the Muang Sam Sip dialect

Consonant system

Initial consonants

p	t	c	k	ʔ
ph	th		kh	
b	d			
m	n	ɲ	ŋ	
f	s			h
v	l	j		

Note: MSS has no consonant clusters.

Examples

pa: ²	'fish'
ta: ²	'eye'
ca: ⁴	'noncommissioned officer (army, air force and police)'
ka: ²	'crow'
ʔa: ⁶	'to open one's mouth'
pha: ³	'to bring along'
tha: ³	'to paint, smear'
kha: ³	'thatch grass'
ba: ²	'to omit, skip'
da: ⁴	'to scold'
ma: ³	'to come'
na: ³	'rice field'
na: ¹	'to be coarse, rough (as of a floor having dirt or sand on it)'
ɲa: ³	'sesame'
fa: ¹	'wall; lid'
sa: ¹	'swamp'
ha: ¹	'to seek'

va: ³	'arm spread (a measure)'
la: ³	'to say good-bye'
ja: ²	'medicine'

Final consonants

p	t	k	ʔ
m	n	ŋ	

Examples

sa:m ¹	'three'
sa:n ¹	'to weave, plait (bamboo)'
sa:ŋ ¹	'to comb (thatch grass)'
sa:p ⁵	'an unpleasant smell (as of body odours)'
sa:t ⁵	'to splash'
sa:k ⁵	'pestle'
sap ¹	'to chop, slash'
sat ¹	'animal'
sak ¹	'to tatto'
saʔ ⁴	'to tear up'

Vowel system

Monophthongs

i, i:	(u) ³ , u:	u, u:
e, e:	ɤ, ɤ:	o, o:
ɛ, ɛ:		ɔ, ɔ: ⁴
a, a:		

Diphthongs

iʊ iə	(wə) ⁵ ui uə
eu	ɤi oi
ɛu	ɔi
ai, a:i	
au, a:u	

Triphthongs

iəu

wəi⁶ uəiExamples

ʔin ²	'Indra (name of a Hindu god)'
ʔi: ²	'title used with first names'
ʔen ²	'tendon, sinew, gut'
ʔe:n ²	'to lean'
kɛʔ ¹	'to pick out, remove (tiny objects with the tip of the finger)'
ʔɛ: ⁶	'the air bladder (of a fish)'
ʔan ²	'clf. for small, long objects'
ʔa: ²	'father's younger sister'
twk ¹	'building'
ʔw:n ⁴	'other, other ones'
ŋɣn ³	'silver'
ʔɣ:n ⁶	'to call'
khuk ⁴	'jail'
ʔu: ⁴	'cradle'
ʔon ⁶	khi: ⁵ ʔon ⁶ 'a kind of plant'
ʔo: ²	'a bowl-shaped vessel (usually used for drinking water)'
khɔʔ ⁴	'to knock'
khɔ: ³	'neck'
ʔiən ²	'eel'
hiu ¹	'hungry'
heu ¹	'chasm'
ʔɛu ²	'waist'
ʔau ²	'to take'
ʔa:u ²	'father's younger brother'
ʔai ²	'to cough'
ʔa:i ²	'shy'
ʔwən ⁶	'to diminish in force (rain)'
ʔɣi ⁴	'to utter'