

The sound symbolic system in Lao

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Introduction

The relationship between sound and meaning of a word has been studied for many decades. It is generally accepted that the relationship is arbitrary. Those phonemes signify no semantic feature.

However, there are some words or word class that is believed to be able to signify semantic features. In English, for example, it has been said that fl- can signify "movement" like in flow, flake, flutter, flap, flicker, fling, flit, flur, flirt, or that gl- implies "illumination" like

in glow, glare, and gloom (Jespersen, 1922). In Thai, some believe that n- signifies the feature of "bent, crooked" like in nok, nikh, noon, num, noon, and the feature of "dull, stupid" like in noo, nau, num, naam. But we often encounter the exception with the opposite feature from the above like in not, naam, "beautiful, elegant"

For many years, linguists have found that there is in the lexicon of many languages a class of word which their sounds seemingly signify the semantic features of a word. This class of words has been named "ideophone"

To mention but a few, Clement M. Doke (1935:118) defined it as "a word, often onomatopoeic, which describes a predicate, qualificative or adverb in respect to manner, colour, sound, action, state, or intensity." Fordyce (1988) defined it as "an ideophone is a member of a set of words with a phonologically determined semantic feature or field."

Such ideophones have been studied in many languages as Semai, a Mon-khmer language (Diffloth, 1976) Standard Thai (Payom, 1976) Korean (Kong On Kim, 1977) Rengao, a Mon-khmer (Gregerson, 1984) Japanese (Hamano, 1986) Yoruba, an African language (Fordyce, 1988) Chinese Shan or Tai Nuea (Thananan, 1992)

In Lao, Crisfield (1978) has found that the same stem of ideophone with different vowels signify different shapes and sizes of things they describe, for example :

khiit liit "very small thin and long (thing)"

khêet lêet "flat and long (thing)"

khêet lêet "very flat and long (thing)"

khaat laät "very big and long (thing)"

khoot loôt "big and round long (thing)"

khôot lôot "very small round and long (thing)"

It is clear from the above that high front vowel /i/ and front vowels with spread lips /e, ε/ signify the features of "small" and "flat" respectively, and /a/ (low open vowel) signifies the feature of "big" and back vowels with rounded lips signify the feature of "round". The phonetic motivation or iconicity of vowels for these semantic features are, therefore, explainable.

In this article, I will present that not only the vowels but also the reduplication, the consonants and tones can signify some semantic features. The analysis based on the data collected from a Vientiane speaker.

The Categories of Ideophones in Lao

The ideophones in Lao or in any other languages, I believe, can be categorized into eight groups according to the modes of sensory perception they describe. (parenthesis is optional)

2.1 Ideophones describing sounds :

ηηη (ηηη) "a sound of a small bell ringing"

pok (pok) "the sound of water dropping"

2.2 Ideophones describing appearances or shapes/sizes

Ex. khôn jôn "be skinny (as of an old man)"

phâa nâa "be spread wide (as of a mushroom)"

2.3 Ideophones describing manners of action :

Ex. kaη ka "of walking with legs widely apart"

khəʔ jəʔ "of jumping (as of a small frog)"

2.4 Ideophones describing colors :

Ex. ciɿŋ khiɿŋ "red as of burning charcoal"

khīi līi "black as of charcoal"

2.5 Ideophones describing tastes :

Ex. ʔam lam "bitter (but a good taste)"

ʔuaj luaj "sweet as of sugar"

2.6 Ideophones describing smellings :

Ex. hui (hui) "good smell as of roasted fish"

tīŋ (tīŋ) "bad smell as of urine"

2.7 Ideophones describing feelings :

Ex. tup (tup) "painful as of wound"

hum (hum) "warm slightly"

2.8 Ideophones describing state of things :

Ex. ʔeʔ ʔleʔ "soft as of a rotten fruit"

mīit nīit "wet as of a wet towel"

The syntactic characteristic of ideophones in Lao

Ideophones are included in the category of adverb, modifying verb and adjectival verb, but different from other subcategories in which ideophones occur after only a specific verb or other semantically related verbs, whereas adverbs are not selectively restricted. For example, caaj waaj can occur after dɛŋ "red", not be after dam "black" or khaaw "white" which need other ideophones : khīi līi and ʔoók loók respectively.