The sound symbolic system in Lao

Thananan Trongdee

Prince of Songkla University

Pattani Campus, Thailand

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 ъ- signifies the feature of "bent, crooked" like in ъน and ъำ and the feature of "dull, stupid" like in ъำ and ъํา and ъám. But we often encounter the expection with the opposite feature from the above like in ъám and ъํา, ъ้ and ъร "beatiful, 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 onomatopoieic, 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."


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:

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\begin{align*}
\text{kʰiit ʰiit} & \text{ "very small thin and long (thing)" } \\
\text{kʰeet ʰeet} & \text{ "flat and long (thing)" } \\
\text{kʰeet ʰeet} & \text{ "very flat and long (thing)" } \\
\text{kʰeet ʰaat} & \text{ "very big and long (thing)" } \\
\text{kʰoôt ʰoôt} & \text{ "big and round long (thing)" } \\
\text{kʰoôt ʰoôt} & \text{ "very small round and long (thing)" }
\end{align*}
\]
It is clear from the above that high front vowel /i/ and front vowels with spread lips /e, e/ 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 feature 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 jóm "be skinny (as of an old man)"
phâa nàa "be spread wide (as of a mushroom)"

2.3 Ideophones describing manners of action:
Ex. kaŋ ka "of walking with legs widely apart"
khɔŋ jɔŋ "of jumping (as of a small frog)"
2.4 Ideophones describing colors:
Ex. ɕiːn kʰiːn "red as of burning charcoal"
khɨi lɨi "black as of charcoal"

2.5 Ideophones describing tastes:
Ex. ?am lâm "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"
ʔiːn (ʔiːn) "bad smell as of urine"

2.7 Ideophones describing feelings:
Ex. tʊp (tʊp) "painful as of wound"
hum (hum) "warm slightly"

2.8 Ideophones describing state of things:
Ex. ʔɛʔ ʔlɛʔ "soft as of a rotten fruit"
ʔii lɨit "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: khɨi lɨi and ?oŋk lɨok respectively.