EXPRESSIVES IN SEMAI

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Like many other natural languages, Semai[1]
appears at first glance to have only two basic
lexical classes: nouns and verbs. It has not been
commonly recognized that this language and most
others of the Austroasiatic family have a third
basic word-class of the same order of magnitude as
the first two. This class consists of expressives[2]
or ideophones. I propose to describe here some of
the morphological, syntactic and semantic properties
of Semai expressives and to draw a few theoretical
conclusions.

Word classes in Semai are clearly defined.
The language having a rich system of particles and
prepositions, the problem of identifying word
classes is quite simple. For instance, nouns may
be preceded by the definite article /ʔi/ or by
simple prepositions: /ha/ 'for, because of', /ru/
'with (instrumental or associative)', /ku/ 'at',
/ma/ or /nu/ 'to, towards', /ju/ 'from', /pa/
'down to'. They may be followed by possessive pro-
nouns and deictics. Verbs as a whole, including
adjectives as a subclass, may be preceded by the
negative particles /tɔʔ/ or /pɛʔ/ and by the comple-
tive particle /la/ya/ja/, among others. In identify-
ing deeper or basic lexical classes, the complex
morphology of the language comes in equally handy.

l basic verb roots can be identified by the addi-
on of the indeterminate or the causative or the
minalizing affixes, whereas basic nouns remain
rface nouns which cannot be morphologically
composed.

The result of this analysis is somewhat sur-
ising: the basic classes of noun and verb hardly
erlap. This is surprising in view of the situation
other Austroasiatic languages such as Mundari, or
en in Austronesian languages such as Tagalog, where
rge numbers of roots are reportedly ambivalent.
be sure, there are a few ambivalent roots in
mai as well; in these cases I have not found any
idence that one of the two functions is more
sic than the other. However, the relation between
e verbal meaning and the nominal meaning of the
me root is in each case quite simple. For instance,
e noun roots /bhi:p(m)/ 'blood', /plɛ:?/ 'fruit',
ɔ:m/ 'urine', and /dər/ 'flame' are the product-
jects of the same roots used as verbs and meaning
spectively 'to bleed', 'to fruit', 'to urinate',
d 'to produce flames'. The noun /stit/ 'sling'[3]
the instrument of the verb /stit/ 'to hit with a
ing'. The noun /ŋa:r/ 'the front part' is the
cation of the verb /ŋa:r/ 'to face'. The nouns
u:y/ 'evening' and /mani:?/ 'rain' describe ambiant
mospheric states corresponding to verbs having
ry restricted syntactic uses.

All noun and verb roots have one property in
mmon which may be termed "lexical discreteness."
at is, given a meaning and a corresponding root,
y modification in the phonology of the root will
ve a completely different meaning (or a meaningless
rm), any modification of the meaning will correspond

to a completely different root (or to no existing root). In other words, small differences in the phonology of the root do not correspond to small differences in meaning. This is a direct consequenc of a basic premise in structural as well as genera- tive linguistics that language is not a symbolic formation but a conventional code. I have mentioned these evident principles the better to illustrate how expressives are indeed a totally different kind of linguistic animal. They are not, like nouns, within the domain of identity and class-inclusion notions; unlike verbs, they do not relate the variou elements of a sentence. They are not even subject to the condition of "lexical discreteness." In fact they probably represent a mode of meaning quite different from the analytic-synthetic noun-verb system.

Morphology.

Let us first consider the question of the basic word-class. Expressives can be easily identified by their morphology, which is semantically and formally unlike anything found in nouns and verbs.

1. *Major Reduplication*.

The characteristic morphological feature of expressives is suffixed reduplication of the major syllable. If the expressive has a CVC root, the whole root is repeated, more often three times than two. For example, /tustustus/ 'repeated sound of running fast', /kŭckŭckŭc/ 'noises of swallowing a liquid'. If the root is more complex, only the las syllable (CVC) is reduplicated and suffixed. For example, /dyɔ̃:lyɔ̃:l/ 'the appearance of an object floating down a river and getting stuck here and there' (from root /dyɔ̃:l/). The major reduplicatio

pheme connotes "repetition at intervals of time".

2. *Minor Reduplication.*

Another type of reduplication, found only
expressives, consists in prefixing a minor sylla-
made of two consonants identical respectively
the first and last consonants of the root:
..c^f → $c^i c^f$-c^i...c^f. For example, /dIdyõ:I/
pearance of an object which goes on floating
n', /dhdŋɔh/ 'appearance of nodding constantly'.
the case of CVC roots, there is a difficulty as
above rule would give a form used in verb
phology for the indeterminate mode ($c^m v c^f$ → $c^m c^f$-
c^f); the solution here is to copy only the
tial consonant and to insert an /-r-/ before
fixing the presyllable /c^mr-/: hence $c^m v c^f$ →
-$c^m v c^f$. For example, /hã:c/ → /hrhã:c/ 'the
ınd of dragging something', /kũc/ → /krkũc/ 'all
e noises in one gulp'.[4] The minor reduplication
rpheme connotes "prolongation or continuous
petition in time".

3. *Infix* /-ra-/.

This infix has several allomorphs depending
the structure of the root.

Most expressive roots have two initial
ısonants before the main vowel: in this case,
a-/ can be inserted between these two consonants,
in /.drayõ:I/ 'several objects floating down'.
however, either of the consonants is an /r/
n /-na-/ is infixed instead of /-ra-/. For
mple, /ryɛ:p/ → /rnayɛ:p/ 'appearance of several
ple breathing', /jrã:w/ → /ɲnarã:w/ 'appearance
several people jumping', /cpũ:r/ → /cnapũ:r/
und of several splashes in water'. If the root

already has a minor vowel, only /-r-/ (or /-n-/)
is infixed; thus /cayur/ → /cnayur/ 'appearance of
bushiness in several places (*e.g.*, the tail of the
/tʉ:t/, the brush-tailed porcupine, *Atherurus
macrourus*)'. If the root is a simple monosyllable,
the prefix /rla-/ is added, as /dĩ:w/ → /rladĩ:w/
'appearance of oscillations (*e.g.*, of a suspension
bridge)'.

In all cases, this affix indicates that the
pattern, the movement, the sensation or the sound
occurs in several places. If no other affix is used
then only one instant in time is involved; we have
a "simultaneous plural", as in the examples above.
This infix is almost fully productive over the entir
class of expressives, with very few gaps or irregu-
larities (*e.g.*, /byɛ:k/ 'white' → /brkyɛ:k/ 'several
white things', not **/brayɛ:k/*).

Very often, two or more of the affixes
mentioned above are added to a root. The most
common combination by far is major reduplication +
plural, with the meaning of "discontinuous plural",
i.e. several events occurring in several places,
repeatedly, at intervals, as /grayulyul/ 'several
people shaking something repeatedly'. All three
affixes can be combined, *with the meaning "overlapp*
plural", *i.e.* several events in several places, eacl
continuously repeated, with possible overlapping, a:
/dldrayɔ̃:lyɔ̃:l/.

4. *Modified reduplications.*

There are two other types of reduplication
in which parts of the reduplicated form are modifie
according to fixed rules.

The most common of these is prefixation of

ull copy of the expressive, including any affixes
t may be present, except for the major vowel,
ch is modified. The modified vowel usually
ains the length and nasality of the major vowel
receives the opposite advancement.

Thus front vowels are modified to /u/:

/klcwɛ̃c/ → /klcwũc klcwɛ̃c/ 'irregular flapping
circular movements (*e.g.,* of a tortoise's
feet struggling to escape)'

/pradɛk/ → /praduk pradɛk/ 'noises of scattered
small drops of rain falling on dry leaves or
roof'

Back and central vowels are modified
/ɛ/:

/mŋu:y/ → /mŋɛ:y mŋu:y/ 'people in a crowd
raising their heads here and there'

/prada:k/ → /pradɛk prada:k/ 'noise of scattered
large drops of rain falling on leaves or
roof'[5]

s the reduplicated part is a partial opposite of
root. This type of reduplication is productive
may be termed "antiphonic reduplication". As is
n in the examples, the connotation is "irregularity
tributed in time or space."

The second type of modified reduplication is
h less productive and is restricted to certain
t Semai dialects in the Kampar basin. It is a
fixing reduplication in which only the main
lable of the expressive is repeated while /ma-/
prefixed to this syllable as /r(ŋ)rŋʔaŋ/ →
ŋ)rŋʔaŋ maʔaŋ/ 'appearance of irregular cracks
g., in earth or durian fruit)'. The connotation
the same as that of antiphonic reduplication.

This regular morphology poses no particular
blems except perhaps insofar as it resembles

reduplications and infixations found in nouns and
verbs.[6] But the details actually differ, and even
though /-r-/ and /-a-/ infixes are found in verbs
they never occur together as ə /-ra-/ infix and thei
meanings have nothing to do with plurality. The two
morphologies are contrastive. This in fact opens
the possibility of superposing both on the same root
There is indeed a small class of roots with ambiva-
lent function as expressive and verb. For example,
/cŋa:l/ 'red' can be both a verb and an expressive.
As an expressive it yields the minor-reduplicated
form /clcŋa:l/ 'appearance of a flickering red
object'; as a verb it yields the causative /crŋa:l/
'to make something red'. Similarly /c?ɛ:t/ 'sweet'
minor reduplication /ctc?ɛ:t/, causative /cr?ɛ:t/,
and nominalization /cn?ɛ:t/. As a rule, all color
terms and words for tastes are ambivalently
expressives and stative verbs.

Syntax.

One might expect, from the fact that expressive
describe sensory perceptions, that they would functi
syntactically as adjectives or adverbs. This is not
the case. Whereas adjectives and adverbs follow hea
nouns or verbs, expressives precede sentences or
isolated noun phrases. For example, in /pɲpayaɲ
bi-yryɛ:r ?i-sɔ:k/ 'his hair is disheveled' (expres-
sive + it-unfold + his-hair), the sequence /bi-yryɛ:
?i-sɔ:k/ is a full sentence while the expressive ma
simply be followed by the noun phrase to yield
/pɲpayaɲ ?i-sɔ:k/, also meaning 'his hair is dishev-
eled'. Unlike adjectives and adverbs, expressives
cannot be quantified; even their negation does not
have the meaning of a negated predicate. They can-
not be either the head or the modifier of any other

t of speech; in fact, they are not at all inte-
ated in the syntax of the language and function
tly in the manner of independent clauses, all
themselves.

Syntax will therefore be of very little use in
ting up subclasses of expressives, except perhaps
the level of lexical selection. Since expressives
company clauses where the main verb may be
-nɛ:ŋ/ 'we see', /hi-kmji:p/ 'we feel' or
-grte:k/ 'we hear', and the like, they can be
ssified according to the various modes of percep-
on they pertain to. A number of expressives
scribe sounds in great detail, *e.g.*, /cwcruha:w/
e sound of large quantities of water falling from
high (waterfall, monsoon rain)', but these are a
ority. Most expressives describe visual phenomena,
., /thta?əh/ 'appearance of large stomach con-
ntly bulging out'. Others describe "feelings
<nmji:p/)", that is, bodily sensations of various
ds, from tactile ones to pain, dizziness and
en gut reactions such as impatience, anxiety,
arrassment. Examples: /gpghɐ:p/ 'irritation on
in (*e.g.*, from bamboo hair)', /knarã:crã:c/
peated pains of deep wound', /blb?əl/ 'painful
arrassment', /ll?ɛ̃l/ 'feel of moving water (as
immersed hand); instability (as when boat is
denly rocked); heaving of nausea; anxious
atience (as when waiting for news)'.

Finally, other expressives describe smells
ɔ:y/) and tastes (/rasa:?/). Here again sub-
sses are not completely watertight and there is
ertain amount of overlap, especially between
auditory and the visual subclasses. For example,

in /par par par na:y hɛ:k/ (expressive + 'they fly')
the expressive describes both the flapping movement
and the sound of birds' wings. There may be overlap
between the visual and the feeling subclasses, as in
/rladǐ:wdǐ:w hi-kmji:p/ (expressive + 'we-feel') and
/rladǐ:wdǐ:w hi-nɛ:ŋ grta?/ (expressive + 'we-see
bridge'), where the expressives describe both the
sensation of walking on an oscillating bamboo bridge
and the look of it.

There are even cases where the shift from one
class to another seems to be due to morphological
processes. These *are illustrated by* /kratã:p/
'the intermittent itchy feeling of ant-bites' *vs.*
/klatã:p/ 'the appearance of a swollen ant-bite',
both from the root /ktã:p/.

Semantics.

The meanings of expressives seem to be extremely
detailed and idiosyncratic, describing a situation
perceived as a whole, as an independent clause would.
On the other hand, the same expressive can be used
to describe a variety of situations which at first
glance seem to be quite different but share a common
core which could be defined as a cluster of elemen-
tary sensations. For instance, /klknare:l/ is used
to describe an arrow or knife stiffly vibrating after
embedding itself into a piece of wood; it can also
describe the walk of a tall, skinny old man. The
cluster of sensations common to both meanings (and
recognized by informants) are: stiffness, perpendic-
ularity, and repeated small oscillations.

This principle can help us to penetrate somewhat
deeper into the structure of this part of speech.
Specifically, there is a great deal of improductive
or semi-productive morphology which begins to make

se if we look for and analyse the clusters of
sations this morphology may express.

For instance, the vowel /-a-/ of infix /-ra-/
appears from some expressives without much effect
the meaning; thus /pnpriã:n/ is said to be similar
meaning to /pnpralã:n/ 'staring eyes'. The mean-
of plurality of the /-ra-/ infix may therefore
borne primarily by the /-r-/. In fact, other
els, especially /-i-/, can be infixed after this
-/ morpheme. Examples:

srajã:p/	'many tears falling in a large and fast flow'
srijã:p/	'many tears falling, making many slow little rivulets'
prlɔ:ŋ/	'appearance of a completely bald head, big and smooth like a papaya'
prilɔ:ŋ/	'appearance of several eggs (same shape but smaller than a head)'; also 'appearance of polka dots'
ranɔn/	'appearance of two people walking in line carrying heavy loads'
rinɔn/	'long line of people carrying heavy loads'

we analyse these meanings into clusters of
sations the /a/ : /i/ contrast immediately
ears as a question of magnitude: /-a-/ refers
ually to large things, few in number, /-i-/ to
ller numerous objects.

The vowel /-u-/ also functions as an infix
er /-r-/. Examples:

rahɔp/	'the appearance of stones on the road'
ruhɔp/	'the chaotic appearance of boulders in a river bed or of badly planted teeth growing in all directions'

But this infix is much rarer than the /-i-/ infix.
Very often it does not have any obvious meaning to
native speakers: /gpgluhɔp/ and /gpglahɔp/ are
indifferently 'appearance of caved-in cheeks'.
Often the form with /-u-/ does not contrast with
any other form. Example:

/rɲruhɔːɲ/   'the appearance of teeth attacked by
               decay'
/sɲsulɔɲ/   'the odd appearance of a snake's head,
               sharp yet not pointed, rounded-off yet
               not round'

So far as any common meaning can be detected between
/-u-/ forms, it would seem to have something to do
with "unevenness" (*cf.* /cpruhɔp/).

     Having thus split the /-ra-/ infix into two
morphemes, /-r-/ and /-a-/, we recognize immediately
that /-l-/, although less common, has the same
combinational properties as /-r-/. It can be follow
by the infixes /-a-/, /-u-/, and /-i-/ and contrasts
with /-r-/ in the same roots. Examples:

/swslayɛːw/   'long hair in order'
/swsluyɛːw/   'long hair in disorder, plentiful'
/kcliwɔ̃ːc/   'continuous wavy lines seen in one
               glance'
/kcriwɔ̃ːc/   'windings on a road seen one after
               after another' (see also the example
               above with /klatã̃ːp/ and /kratã̃ːp/.

Still other infixes can be seen, but these are rare
and their meaning remains obscure at the moment:

/-m-/ 'massiveness'(?).
     /kckmrʔɛːc/ 'short, fat arms'
     /thtmarĩh/~/thtarĩh/ 'large face'
     /cwcmrhaːw/ 'sound of waterfall'

-/ 'movement, energy'(?).

  /cmcayɛm/   'contracted fingers of human or
                       animal, not moving'

  /cmcŋayɛm/   'contracted legs of insect moving'

t Variation.

This analysis can be actually be pursued quite
it further.

The root of expressives--or, let us say, the
ɛtch of sound (usually CCVC) which remains after
oval of the infixes described above--is itself
ject to numerous variations. This is especially
ɛ of major vowels. Examples:

  /grĩ:p/ 'noise of chewing small, brittle things'
  /grŭ:p/ 'noise of chewing large, somewhat soft
          things'
  /grã:p/ 'noise of chewing large, hard things'
  /grɔ:p/ 'noise of chewing large, crispy things'

Initial consonants may disappear for no
arent reason: both /glĩ:l/ and /lĩ:l/ describe
gait of a very fat person "throwing around"
ɔt.

Final consonants may also vary within a small
ɟe. Examples:

  /prbuɲbuɲbuɲ/ 'noise of bubbles in water'
  /prbucbucbuc/ 'noise of small bubbles in mud'
  /prbusbusbus/ 'noise of big bubbles in mud'

Several of these variations may even affect the
ɛ root, creating whole families of related forms:

-parpar/ 'noise and appearance of birds in flight,
ɔf fish struggling among roots in water'
-pɛrpɛr/ 'small bird or insect in flight'
‹pɛr/,/knapɛrpɛr/,/krkpɛ̃r/,/knapɛ̃rpɛ̃r/,/grgpɛr/,
'ŋnapɛrpɛr/ 'noises and movements of flapping

    wings or small cloth, of children running, of
    thrown objects'

/purpurpur/,/krkpur/,/khapurpur/ 'flight of large
   bird, flapping of large cloth'

With the foregoing compare the apparently related
forms among verbs and nouns:

    /kpɛr/ 'to flap wings' (intransitive)

    /kipɛr/ , /kapɛr/ 'to shake (small clothes)'
      (transitive)

    /kipur/ 'to shake (large clothes)' (transitive)

    /grpar/ 'mountain imperial pigeon'

    /grpər/ 'small bat'(generic term)

    It should be clear from these examples that
expressives are not subject to the condition of
"lexical discreteness" and that the same exemption
may apply to certain verbs and nouns related to
expressives. It follows that the "roots" of
expressives have to be analysed into very small
"morphemes"--elements as small, perhaps, as
distinctive features. We must be prepared to see
the expressive as a whole decomposed in such manner
to discard the conventional notions of root and
morphology, and to treat expressives as micro-
sentences made up of distinctive features. This
type of analysis will presumably be feasible when
we know considerably more about the meaning of
expressives than we do now.

    We should keep in mind, however, that this sort
of segmentation might be a misguided approach:
the reason for the lack of lexical discreteness is
due not so much to the small size of the meaninful
elements as to the presence of phonological
symbolism. If the meaning of the expressive has
some analogy with the substance of the word, then

ll differences in meaning will correspond to small
ferences in phonology. This is quite clear in
major vowel variations observable in the /grʔ:p/
ily, for example.

What is important here is perhaps not so much
acoustic quality, but the sensations produced in
vocal tract by the articulation of the sound.
s may explain the so-called morphology described
ve: /i/ "feels" smaller than /a/ , /l/ "feels"
tinuous and homogeneous, while /r/ "feels"
errupted and plural. Even in the regular
phology, reduplications are acoustically and
iculatorily symbolic of their meaning "repetition
time." Modified reduplications also indicate
rality, but the modification, especially when
iphonic, introduces a dissymmetry which is
bolic of the meaning "irregularly scattered".
s last case shows that there may be more abstract
ms of symbolism based, for example, on phonolo-
al structure and not simply on acoustics or
iculation.

As the rich possibilities of linguistic
bolism have not yet been investigated in detail,
we can do at the moment is to mention some of
problems with which we are confronted. For
tance:

Since most expressives do not describe
ses, are there forms of symbolism other than
ustic symbolism?

What are the articulatory sensations of
ch we are aware? Which among these are selected
establish analogies with other sensations?

What is the size of the phonological units to be considered?

Can such articulatory configurations as reduplication, contrast, asymmetry, harmony, and word structure be the basic elements of symbolism?

What are the basic elements of meaning (in terms of clusters of sensations) contained in expressives?

Are there non-sensory forms of symbolism? *For instance, is it possible to base symbolism not* on phonology but on lexicon? That is to say, could the relation between /bi:t/ 'to squint' (verb) and /stsibĩ:t/: 'squinting eyes' (expressive) be *explained this way, the lexical item being taken as* a material object and an analogic (expressive) form being related to it?

If we add to these descriptive problems those of history and cross-cultural comparison, we have to admit that we have on our hands a whole branch of linguistics, one in which language symbolism is to be related to other symbolic forms found in culture, especially in music. Austroasiaticists are fortunate in having in all or most languages of the family a very large word-class where such questions can be studied at leisure.

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[1] Semai and Temiar are the two main Austroasiatic languages of Malaya; both belong to the Senoic or Central Aslian group. This research has been financed partly by the American Council of Learned Societies (Summer 1971) and by the National Science Foundation (1972-1973).

[2] As used in this paper, *onomatopoetic* forms are those displaying acoustic symbolism and having

tactic and morphological properties totally
ferent from those of verbs and nouns. *Ideophones*
 words displaying phonological symbolism of any
d (acoustic, articulatory, structural) and having
tinct morpho-syntactic properties; ideophones
lude onomatopoetic forms as a subclass.
ressives have the same morpho-syntactic properties
ideophones, but their symbolism, if such exists,
not necessarily phonological; expressives contain
ophones as a subclass.

[3]From Malay /lastik/, from English 'elastic'.

[4]This morpheme is not fully productive; in any
e, CVC roots are not common in expressives; the
ority of expressives have CCVC roots.

[5]Only in Semelaic (South Aslian) is there a
d /da:k/ 'water'. The expressive /prada:k/ is
bably the only cognate to this word to be found
Senoic (Central Aslian).

[6]See in this volume G. Benjamin's "An outline
Temiar grammar" and G. Diffloth's "Minor syllable
alism on Senoic."