EXPRESSIVES IN SEMAI

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Like many other natural languages, Semai 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 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: /hə/ '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 pronouns and deictics. Verbs as a whole, including adjectives as a subclass, may be preceded by the negative particles /tɔʔ/ or /pɛʔ/ and by the comparative particle /lə/jə/ja/, among others. In identifying deeper or basic lexical classes, the complex morphology of the language comes in equally handy.
All basic verb roots can be identified by the addition of the indeterminate or the causative or the minimalizing affixes, whereas basic nouns remain surface nouns which cannot be morphologically composed.

The result of this analysis is somewhat surprising: the basic classes of noun and verb hardly overlap. This is surprising in view of the situation in other Austroasiatic languages such as Mundari, or in Austronesian languages such as Tagalog, where large 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 evidence that one of the two functions is more basic than the other. However, the relation between the verbal meaning and the nominal meaning of the same root is in each case quite simple. For instance, the noun roots /bhiːp(m)/ 'blood', /plɛːʔ/ 'fruit', p:m/ 'urine', and /dɛr/ 'flame' are the products of the same roots used as verbs and meaning respectively 'to bleed', 'to fruit', 'to urinate', and 'to produce flames'. The noun /stìʔ/ 'sling' is the instrument of the verb /stìʔ/ 'to hit with a slings'. The noun /ŋaːːʔ/ 'the front part' is the location of the verb /ŋaːːʔ/ 'to face'. The nouns wːyː 'evening' and /manːʔː/ 'rain' describe ambient atmospheric states corresponding to verbs having very restricted syntactic uses.

All noun and verb roots have one property in common which may be termed "lexical discreteness." That is, given a meaning and a corresponding root, any modification in the phonology of the root will give 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 consequence of a basic premise in structural as well as generative 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 various 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', /kückücküc/ 'noises of swallowing a liquid'. If the root is more complex, only the last syllable (CVC) is reduplicated and suffixed. For example, /dy3:ly3:/ 'the appearance of an object floating down a river and getting stuck here and there' (from root /dy3:/). The major reduplication
2. Minor Reduplication.

Another type of reduplication, found only expressively, consists in prefixing a minor syllable made of two consonants identical respectively the first and last consonants of the root: \( C^f \rightarrow C^i C^f C^i \ldots C^f \). For example, /dįdŷsːl/ 'appearance of an object which goes on floating in', /dhŷndɔh/ 'appearance of nodding constantly'. In the case of CVC roots, there is a difficulty as the above rule would give a form used in morphology for the indeterminate mode (\( C^m VC^f + C^m C^f - VC^f \)); the solution here is to copy only the initial consonant and to insert an /-r-/ before prefixing the presyllable /\( C^m r-/\): hence \( C^mVC^f + -r-VC^mC^f \). For example, /hāːc/ → /hrhāːc/ 'the sound of dragging something', /kūc/ → /krkūc/ 'all the noises in one gulp'. The minor reduplication morpheme connotes "prolongation or continuous repetition in time".

3. Infix /-ra-/.

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

Most expressive roots have two initial consonants before the main vowel: in this case, a- / can be inserted between these two consonants, in /draŷsːl/ 'several objects floating down'. However, either of the consonants is an /r/ or /n /-na-/ is infixed instead of /-ra-/.

For example, /rycːp/ → /rnayːcːp/ 'appearance of several people breathing', /jраːw/ → /ннаːrаːw/ 'appearance of several people jumping', /cpūːr/ → /cnapūːr/ 'sound 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

/tuːt/, the brush-tailed porcupine, *Atherurus

macrourus*)'. If the root is a simple monosyllable,

the prefix /rə-/ is added, as /dʌːw/ → /rədʌːw/

'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 entire

class of expressives, with very few gaps or irregu-

larities (e.g., /byːk/ 'white' → /brʌkɛːk/ 'several

white things', not */brɛːk/).

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 /græjuˈljuːl/ 'several

people shaking something repeatedly'. All three

affixes can be combined, with the meaning "overlapping

plural", i.e. several events in several places, each

continuously repeated, with possible overlapping, as

/dɪdræjɔːlɪˈjɔːl/.

4. Modified reduplications.

There are two other types of reduplication

in which parts of the reduplicated form are modified

according to fixed rules.

The most common of these is prefixation of
full copy of the expressive, including any affixes that may be present, except for the major vowel, which is modified. The modified vowel usually gains the length and nasality of the major vowel it receives the opposite advancement.

Thus front vowels are modified to /u/:

/klćwěc/ → /klćwǔc klćwěc/ 'irregular flapping circular movements (e.g., of a tortoise's feet struggling to escape)'
/praděk/ → /praduk praděk/ 'noises of scattered small drops of rain falling on dry leaves or roof'

Back and central vowels are modified /ɛ/:

/mεύ:y/ → /mŋɛ:y mŋu:y/ 'people in a crowd raising their heads here and there'
/pradɛ:k/ → /pradɛk pradɛ:k/ 'noise of scattered large drops of rain falling on leaves or roof'5

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

The second type of modified reduplication is much less productive and is restricted to certain Semai dialects in the Kampar basin. It is a prefixing reduplication in which only the main syllable of the expressive is repeated while /mə-/ prefixed to this syllable as /r(ŋ)ŋʔaŋ/ → /r(ŋ)ŋʔaŋ maʔaŋ/ 'appearance of irregular cracks g., in earth or durian fruit). The connotation is the same as that of antiphonic reduplication.

This regular morphology poses no particular problems except perhaps insofar as it resembles
reduplications and infixations found in nouns and verbs. But the details actually differ, and even though /-r-/ and /-a-/ infixes are found in verbs they never occur together as a /-ra-/ infix and their 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 ambivalent function as expressive and verb. For example, /cηaː:/ 'red' can be both a verb and an expressive. As an expressive it yields the minor-reduplicated form /c|cηaː:/ 'appearance of a flickering red object'; as a verb it yields the causative /cηaː:/ 'to make something red'. Similarly /c?εː:t/ 'sweet' minor reduplication /cτc?εː:t/, causative /cηεː:t/, and nominalization /cηεː: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 expressives describe sensory perceptions, that they would function syntactically as adjectives or adverbs. This is not the case. Whereas adjectives and adverbs follow heads of nouns or verbs, expressives precede sentences or isolated noun phrases. For example, in /pppayaŋ bi-γyγiɛ:r ?i-soc:k/ 'his hair is disheveled' (expressive + it-unfold + his-hair), the sequence /bi-γyγiɛ:r ?i-soc:k/ is a full sentence while the expressive may simply be followed by the noun phrase to yield /pppayaŋ ?i-soc:k/, also meaning 'his hair is disheveled'. Unlike adjectives and adverbs, expressives cannot be quantified; even their negation does not have the meaning of a negated predicate. They cannot be either the head or the modifier of any other
part of speech; in fact, they are not at all inte-
reted in the syntax of the language and function
ly in the manner of independent clauses, all
themselves.

Syntax will therefore be of very little use in
ning 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
/-grɛ:k/ 'we hear', and the like, they can be
classified according to the various modes of percep-
ton they pertain to. A number of expressives
dscribe sounds in great detail, e.g., /cwcruha:w/
the sound of large quantities of water falling from
high (waterfall, monsoon rain)', but these are a
ority. Most expressives describe visual phenomena,
/θaʔeh/ 'appearance of large stomach con-
nantly bulging out'. Others describe "feelings
/kmji:p/", that is, bodily sensations of various
nds, from tactile ones to pain, dizziness and
en gut reactions such as impatience, anxiety, and
arrassment. Examples: /gphw:p/ 'irritation on
n (e.g., from bamboo hair)', /knarɛ:crɛ:c/
peated pains of deep wound', /blbʔe/fl 'painful
arrassment', /lʔɛl/ 'feel of moving water (as
mersed hand); instability (as when boat is
denly rocked); heaving of nausea; anxious
ience (as when waiting for news)

Finally, other expressives describe smells
/ŋoːy/ and tastes (/rəsaːʔ/). Here again sub-
classes are not completely watertight and there is
certain amount of overlap, especially between
the auditory and the visual subclasses. For example,
in /par par par na:y he: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 /rladı:wdı:w hi-kmji:p/ (expressive + 'we-feel') and /rladı:wdı:w hi-ne:ŋ grıtaʔ/ (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 /kraṭā:p/ 'the intermittent itchy feeling of ant-bites' vs. /klatā:p/ 'the appearance of a swollen ant-bite', both from the root /kṭā: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 elementary sensations. For instance, /k|knare: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, perpendicularity, 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 improdutive or semi-productive morphology which begins to make
se if we look for and analyse the clusters of
s tatements this morphology may express.

For instance, the vowel /-a-/ of infix /-ra-/ appears from some expressives without much effect
the meaning; thus /pnpɾɪ̃ːn/ is said to be similar
meaning to /pnpɾəlɑːn/ 'staring eyes'. The mean-
inf 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:

ɒɾɑj̃ːp/ 'many tears falling in a large and fast
flow'

ɒɾɪj̃ːp/ 'many tears falling, making many slow
little rivulets'

ɒɾɪ̃ːŋ/ 'appearance of a completely bald head,
big and smooth like a papaya'

ɒɾɪ̃ːŋ/ 'appearance of several eggs (same
shape but smaller than a head)';
also 'appearance of polka dots'

ɒɾənɔŋ/ 'appearance of two people walking in
line carrying heavy loads'

ɒɾɪŋŋ/ 'long line of people carrying heavy
loads'

we analyse these meanings into clusters of
Maria 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:

ɒɾɑhɔp/ 'the appearance of stones on the road'

ɒɾuŋŋ/ '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:

/rnruhɔp/ 'the appearance of teeth attacked by decay'

/snulɔp/ '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 followed by the infixes /-a-/ , /-u-/ , and /-i-/ and contrasts with /-r-/ in the same roots. Examples:

/swsλayɛ:w/ 'long hair in order'
/swsλuyɛ:w/ 'long hair in disorder, plentiful'

/kcliwɔ:c/ 'continuous wavy lines seen in one glance'

/kcrliwɔ:c/ 'windings on a road seen one after another' (see also the example above with /klatɔ:p/ and /kratɔ:p/.

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

/-m-/ 'massiveness'(?).
/kckmrʔɛ:c/ 'short, fat arms'
/tthmarΤh/~ttharΤh/ 'large face'
/cwcmrha:w/ 'sound of waterfall'
'movement, energy'.
'contracted fingers of human or animal, not moving'
'contracted legs of insect moving'

Variation.

This analysis can be actually be pursued quite further.

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

'noise of chewing small, brittle things'
'noise of chewing large, somewhat soft things'
'noise of chewing large, hard things'
'noise of chewing large, crispy things'

Initial consonants may disappear for no apparent reason: both /gɬɬɬ/ and /ɬɬɬ/ describe gait of a very fat person "throwing around" not.

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

'noise of bubbles in water'
'noise of small bubbles in mud'
'noise of big bubbles in mud'

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

'noise and appearance of birds in flight, of fish struggling among roots in water'
'small bird or insect in flight'
'noises and movements of flapping
wings or small cloth, of children running, of
thrown objects'
/ purpurpur/ ,/ kryptur/ ,/ knapurpur/ 'flight of large
bird, flapping of large cloth'

With the foregoing compare the apparently related
forms among verbs and nouns:
/kiper/ 'to flap wings' (intransitive)
/kiper/ , /kapar/ 'to shake (small clothes)'
(transitive)
/kipur/ 'to shake (large clothes)' (transitive)

/grpar/ 'mountain imperial pigeon'
/grpar/ '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 meaningful
elements as to the presence of phonological
symbolism. If the meaning of the expressive has
some analogy with the substance of the word, then
All differences in meaning will correspond to small differences in phonology. This is quite clear in major vowel variations observable in the /grɪp/ family, 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. This may explain the so-called morphology described above: /i/ "feels" smaller than /a/, /ŋ/ "feels" continuous and homogeneous, while /r/ "feels" interrupted and plural. Even in the regular morphology, reduplications are acoustically and articulatorily symbolic of their meaning "repetition of time." Modified reduplications also indicate plurality, but the modification, especially when eliphonic, introduces a dissymmetry which is symbolic of the meaning "irregularly scattered". This last case shows that there may be more abstract forms of symbolism based, for example, on phonological structure and not simply on acoustics or articulation.

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

Since most expressives do not describe cases, are there forms of symbolism other than acoustic symbolism?

What are the articulatory sensations of which we are aware? Which among these are selected to 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 /biːt/ 'to squint' (verb) and /stʃɪtː/ '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 different from those of verbs and nouns. *Ideophones* words displaying phonological symbolism of any kind (acoustic, articulatory, structural) and having distinct morpho-syntactic properties; ideophones include onomatopoetic forms as a subclass. *Expressives* have the same morpho-syntactic properties ideophones, but their symbolism, if such exists, not necessarily phonological; expressives contain phonemes as a subclass.

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

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

5. Only in Semelaiic (South Aslian) is there a word /daːk/ 'water'. The expressive /pradaːk/ is probably the only cognate to this word to be found in Senoic (Central Aslian).

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