EXPRESSIVE PHONOLOGY AND PROSAIC PHONOLOGY
IN MON-KHMER

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Many Mon-Khmer languages have a basic part of speech which has no equivalent in the classical system inherited from the Graeco-Latin tradition. The terms "phonaesthetic words" (Henderson, 1965), "impressifs" (Durand, 1961), "descriptive words" (SIL linguists, passim), to mention but a few, have been used in the past to label this word class; and Vietnamese linguists divide it into two categories: tượng thanh ("sound-imitative") and tượng hình ("form-imitative"). In a previous study, I have called these words "expressives" (Diffloth, 1972), by reference to Jakobson (1966), who was following Pierce in equating expressive meaning with iconicity.

In languages of the European subcontinent, iconicity is also found, but it is often weak and unpredictably scattered, leading a Bengali friend of mine to remark about the prosaic flavor of these languages. Because of this weakness, many linguists are ill at ease with iconicity, and no models have been devised to describe it. And even in languages where it is quite prominent, western investigators simply ignored the annoying fact, as in the case of Sre, for instance. There are exceptions however: Henderson, in her work on Khasi, has always confronted the issue with an even mind, and I would like to follow her example here.

As a general point, I would like to say that iconicity is a basic mode of meaning, and that it is especially clear and concentrated in the word class of Expressives. By studying this word class, we may develop methods and devise models for describing iconicity, and we may then show exactly how pervasive iconicity is in the rest of the language, for example in syntax.

If this claim can be supported in a convincing way, it could have wide repercussions, not only in the small field of Mon-Khmer studies, but in linguistic theory as a whole, and especially in its recent developments. Generative semanticists construct underlying representations which are more and more different from phonetic surface representations, and thus more and more abstract as they approach the status of semantic representations. This dislocating, which seems legitimate for describing what Pierce called symbolic, or conventional meaning, is at loggerheads with the very principle of iconicity which relies on a commonness of form and meaning.

It is in fact, as well as in principle, impossible to describe iconic patterns with a generative semantic approach, or indeed with any variant model which uses rewrite rules as the main descriptive device, as I pointed out some time ago (Diffloth, 1972).

In order to describe Expressives and other iconic phenomena in language, it will be necessary to create an Aesthetic Component of grammar, distinct from, but imbricated into, the logico-phonological component which has been the sole preoccupation of generativists. Adding a whole new component may well disrupt the imposing elegance and simplicity of the generative semantic model, but language does have many facets, and an adequate model must somehow reflect this diversity.

The theoretical stakes are therefore quite high, and the arguments should be accordingly compelling. Unfortunately, the data available today on Expressives is poor, and we do not even have methods for establishing with certainty the presence of iconicity. And while any person who uses or works with Mon-Khmer Expressives soon acquires a sensitivity to their iconic patterns, it would be good to find ways of convincing the sceptic and the tepid.

I am not sure this can be done at the moment, but in this paper, I would like to draw attention to certain easily observable phonological peculiarities of Mon-Khmer Expressives, which are best explained by appealing to the notion of iconicity. This will constitute but one line of evidence in the broader argument that iconicity is the very raison d'être of the whole word class called Expressive.

I will consider three distantly related Mon-Khmer languages: Khasi, Sre and Semai, where Expressives are very numerous and easy to identify formally by their particular morphology.

When we describe the phonology of these languages, we find that many statements made about the phonology of prosaic, i.e. non-expressive words, have to be modified when applied to Expressives. In other words, we seem to have two distinct but overlapping phonological systems: a Prosaic phonology and an Expressive phonology; and while the differences have sometimes been noted, they have not been shown to be the work of iconicity.

According to that kind of explanation, every pattern found in Expressive phonology and absent in Prosaic phonology should have iconic value, and should be found in particular Expressives with precisely that value. One of the converse propositions would be that phonological patterns which are found in Prosaic but not in Expressive phonology should have no iconic value at all in the aesthetic system of that language. I have no good evidence for the second, but will try to exemplify here the first of these two predictions. For Khasi and Sre, I will only indicate some of the phonological differences, and for Semai, I will

try, in addition, to explain them through iconicity..

Khasi Expressives have been identified and included in the cate-
gory of Adverbs by both Rabel ("proper adverbs", 1961 p. 63) and Henderson
("phonaesthetic adverbs", 1976a). One of their morphological properties
is reduplication, either in full form, e.g.:

ŋii ʔeec thɔɲ-thɔɲ la ka rii "we love our country very dearly"
where the Expressive thɔɲ-thɔɲ is said to mean "dearly, intensely (love)"
by Nissor Singh (1902), but was explained to me by young native Khasis
as referring to the beats of the heart, in clearly iconic fashion;
or in modified form:

ki šu buʔ Iŋrum-Iŋram ya ki deeŋ "they just store the timber care-
lessly" where the Expressive Iŋrum-Iŋram means: "carelessly, in such a
way as to obstruct the passage". But there may well be other productive
morphemes. The very idiosyncratic sound-meaning associations noted by
Rabel-Heyman (1976), should not, I think, be considered morphemes in the
usual sense, but iconic elements of the aesthetic system of Khasi Ex-
pressives. Normal morphemes, although not necessarily productive, should
have sufficiently abstract meanings to be applicable throughout a given
word class.

In her penetrating article on Khasi initial clusters, Henderson
(1976b) drew the distinction between accidental and systematic gaps in
Khasi phonology, but she starts with the warning: "many of the permitted
combinations are exclusively, or almost exclusively, reserved for fami-
lies of expressive words with a phonaesthetic function", and she later
amends most of her phonological statements by remarks along the same
line. At least one exceptional pattern of this kind is clearly iconic
and has been noted by both Henderson (1965) and Rabel-Heyman (1976):
the presence of final -k. The original final *-k inherited from Proto-
Mon-Khmer has turned to -ʔ in Khasi (e.g. šɲuʔ "hair", thiaʔ "to sleep"),
but in Expressives we find numerous examples of Khasi final -k:

kʰɛk "(stopping) abruptly"

krɛk "(sparkling) suddenly"

kʰnɔk-kʰnɔk "(walking) with a limp"

tŋuk-tŋɔk "(jostling) roughly"

These words describe sensations which have an abrupt or forceful ending,
like that of the sound -k in Khasi. A final -ʔ would also be abrupt, but
more sparing in muscular activity. Whether or not this is the basis for
iconicity here will have to be decided on more abundant and systematic
evidence.

Sre, of the Bahnaric branch, has a well defined word class of Expressives, although the fact is ignored in Manley's book (1966), and in other descriptions of Sre which I have seen. From the available dictionaries (Dournes, 1950; Drouin and K'nai, 1962), it is possible to extract the characteristic affixes which define the class of Expressives. Since these have never been described, I will list here the more frequent and obvious morphemes, and, whenever possible, their meanings. Like other words in the language, Expressives have either monosyllabic roots: (C_i) C_mVC_f, or disyllabic roots: $C_ivC_mVC_f$ where the minor vowel v is either /ə/, a vocalic liquid or a vocalic nasal.

1) Reduplication

Full reduplication is only found in monosyllabic roots:

wiw-wiw "denying movements of the head"

ɓlɛɛp-ɓlɛɛp "licking movements"

In disyllabic roots, only the final C_mVC_f portion of the root is reduplicated and prefixed:

məm-dəməm "being absorbed (in eating)"

ŋɛɛ-srŋɛɛ "in slanted patterns"

pɔh-smpɔh "seriously, not half-way"

2) Reduplication and replacement by initial r-:

For both types of roots, only the C_mVC_f portion of the root is reduplicated and prefixed as $C_m'V'$ C_f', and C_m' is replaced by r-:

riw-wiw "denying movements"

ruun-ʔuun "many swellings"

rɔc-grɔc "(eating) a lot"

rik-mhik "softened (earth)"

But in case C_f is an -r, C_m' is replaced by l- instead of r-:

liir-ciir "brilliant (fire)"

lɛɛr-mhɛɛr "(sniffing) carefully"

this peculiar property of roots with final -r has the effect of avoiding *the creation of initial rV'r- syllables which are excluded in the whole* of Sre phonology, whether Expressive or Prosaic.

The meaning of this r- (or l-) replacive prefix is suggested by the following example from Drouin and K'nai (1962):

glɔc "suddenly", rɔc-glɔc suddenly of several people" (e.g. entering a house)

It appears to be similar to the -ra- infix of Semai Expressives (Diffloth, 1976) which means "simultaneous plural". It is also the most productive, and therefore the most useful for defining Sre Expressives.

3) Reduplication and replacement by initial l-:

This affix is similar to the above, except that C_m' is replaced by l-:

laay-yaay "swinging"

laan-ʔaan "(pulling) vigourously"

lah-ɲhah "eagerly, impulsively"

lɔm-gɔm "unstable, shaking"

lɛɛt-khɛɛt "vacillating"

This affix is less common than the r- replacive affix, and I could not ascertain its meaning.

4) Reduplication and insertion of -rə-:

For this affix, a -rə- syllable is inserted between the two members of the reduplicated form:

ŋuu-rə-ŋuu "livid"

ʔɛɛw-rə-ʔɛɛw "feeling of weakness"

chiw-rə-chiw "whisperingly, in a low voice"

khəə-rə-khəə "limping" (the French lexicographer gives "clopin-clopant', one of the rare expressive words of that language).

5) Reduplication and replacement by final -h:

In the reduplicated part, only C_i is copied, C_f is replaced by -h, and the copy of the main vowel is shortened:

dah-daat "vacillating" (from the root: daat)

yɔh-yɔn "limping" (from yɔn)

dɛh-dwɛɛw "(walking) legs widely apart" (from: dwɛɛw)

6) Triplication and replacement by initial t-:

The full root is copied once without any modification, and $C'_m V' C'_f$ is copied again and prefixed while C'_m is replaced by initial t-:

tul-hul-hul "feeling of heat" (from the root: hul)

təəy-ɓrəəy-ɓrəəy "shredded, (back basket) torn up"

teet-mheet-mheet "appearance of very flat nose"

tun-plun-plun "(dog's) dangling ears"

7) Vowel chiming

These are fully reduplicated forms with modified vowel qualities:

cɔk-cɛk "(speaking) too much, carelessly"

chuŋ-chaŋ "-id.-"

rɲjuh-rɲjah "bushy, messy"

Both Khasi and Semai have patterns similar to this one: in Semai, the affix conveys the meaning of irregularity, asymmetry, imbalance (Diffloth, 1976), a meaning which seems similar to that of the Sre affix. Unfortunately, the data available on Sre does not allow us to discern a pattern in the choice of vowel pairs, even though a sort of abstract sound symbolism appears to be present in this case too.

There are several other morphological processes in Sre Expressives, but the number of instances is not sufficient yet to describe their patterns.

Many Sre Expressives stand out by their peculiar phonetic makeup: there are several initial sound sequences which are only found in Expressives and seem excluded from the Prosaic vocabulary:

a) the initial ɲw- cluster

lən-ɲwən   "(vegetables) made soft by cooking"[1]

b) the finals -ɨɨw and -əəw:

pɨɨw, rɨɨw-pɨɨw "large ears"

ləəw, lɨɨw "bloated stomach"

Austronesian (Chamic) borrowings have introduced a final -əw:

rəbəw "100,000"

maləw "ashamed"

but otherwise there are no back or central vowels (/a/ and /aa/ excluded) before -w in this language.

    c)   medial wɨɨ- and wəə-:

      kwɨɨŋ "slanted"

      rə-kʰwəə "touching slowly, groping"

There are also phonological patterns which are not absolutely excluded from the prosaic vocabulary but only very rare, while they are very common in Expressives, for example the combination w- -w:

      kʰweew, reew-kʰweew "all eaten up"

      cweew, cwaaw "howling"

      kʰwɛw "widely open"

      wɨw "denying movements"

The few prosaic words having this configuration of consonants, wɨw "too wide", kəlwaaw "a kind of flute", may actually turn out to be Expressives, as the first example, or to have been historically derived from Expressives, as in the second.

The fact that all the phonological patterns exemplified above revolve around the sound /w/ is probably not an accident, but I believe, due to its rich phonaesthetic possibilities which are well exploited in Sre, and more generally in Mon-Khmer Expressives (see Shorto, 1973). The general image it conveys is something like "free, unobstructed movement", and this may begin to explain the unusual ɲw- cluster of lən-ɲwən, where an initial ɲ- usually conveys the notion of elasticity, flexibility. But we cannot push the matter much further in the present state of knowledge about Sre.

On Semai, a Mon-Khmer language in the interior of Malaysia, I can speak with a little more confidence; the forms and meanings of the affixes which are particular to Expressives have already been described (Diffloth, 1976), sufficiently at least to allow the identification of Expressives in that language.

An initial attempt has been made at describing the iconic mechanisms of Semai Expressives, but it should be evident that there are serious problems in the semantic area: while some Expressives are well established in the speech community, and have become clichés of sorts, which any speaker can explain with precision, others are more personal and idiosyncratic. Many Expressives are created on the spur of the moment, and their meaning is tied to a fleeting sensation which arose on a certain occasion. This creativity certainly relies on iconic principles shared

by all speakers and insuring communication. But when such Expressives are abstracted from the particular situation where they arose, they may only have a very vague semantic content. This problem was summarised for me by an English-speaking Semai who said that these were not real words, but rather "action-words", adding: "we just fire them".

There are at least two patterns where the phonology of Semai Expressives differs in a systematic way from that of prosaic words:

Many Semai Expressives have a w- -p configuration:

gp-gwəp "(cockle-shell or lips) opening and closing"

gp-gweep, dp-dwəp "movements of bats wings"

lp-lwãã̃p "opening and closing (of thighs of small children about to fall)"

gp-gwɛɛp "walking style of very fat person, with shoulders jerking"

hp-hiwɔ̃ɔ̃p "movements of copulation"

The iconic mechanism is fairly clear: the medial w- conveys the sensation of free movement, as we saw in Sre. The final consonant, appropriately, says something about the way the sensation ended; a final stop suggests a neat, abrupt ending, and a bilabial closure suggests wide or heavy contact. In my large lexical collection on Semai, only one prosaic word has this w- -p configuration: dawãã̃p, a plant name (unidentified); but plant and animal names are all subject to being replaced by taboo euphemisms, very often drawn from the class of Expressives.[2]

The other pattern is found in certain final -VC sequences and involves a historical question.

In the prosaic vocabulary, short /a/ followed by a final palatal (/-c/, /-ɲ/, /-y/) was raised in Proto-Semai to /ɛ/ in certain dialects, and further to /e/ in the other dialects, and even to /i/ after nasals (Diffloth, 1977). So that we find: *sac "flesh" : /sɛc/, /sec/

*ʔaɲ "I" : /ʔɛɲ/, /ʔeɲ/

*krɲaɲ "to grin" : /krɲɛɲ/, /krɲeɲ/, /krɲiɲ/

*lway "a bee" : /lwɛy/, /lwey/

*bəlay "spirit-house" : /balɛy/, /baley/; from Malay: balai but there are large numbers of Expressives ending in /-ac/, /-aɲ/, /-ay/ and their nasalised counterparts:

rɲ-rkaɲ, raŋkaɲ : "very thin (people, stick-insects)"

ktaɲ : "hard meat, scarred face, protruding veins"

braɲ-braɲ : "sending sparks"

bɲ-bralaɲ : "movement of flames, of licking"

pɲ-payaɲ : "dishevelled"

pʔãc : "spear penetrating, stepping in mud"

jc-jlʔãc : "big heap (of snake, of fat person sitting)"

kãc: "sensation of being strangled"

ckãc : "(pigs, drunks) eating noisily"

klcwãc : "movements of tortoise's feet"

ɲac : "sensation of stabbing into live flesh"

bracãy : "sparks, stone bursting"

syãy, cyãy : "frying noise"

cy-cŋayãy : "clenching, contracting"

py-planday : "arched (back)"

The iconic mechanism, here again, is fairly clear: given that final palatals generally describe flexibility with various degrees of force in decreasing order from -c to -ɲ to -y, it is preferable to keep this palatal articulation, with the palatal on-glide, very distincly audible, and even to exagerate it by maintaining a transition from a very open vowel like /a/ all the way to a palatal closure or narrowing. The sound change, which, naturally, would close this gap by raising the vowel from /a/ to /ɛ/, then to /e/ or even /i/ would diminish or destroy the iconic value of these words. So the sound change which went into effect in Prosaic phonology, was apparently prevented in Expressives. It is important to note that the resistance of Expressives to sound change, which has often been noted, is probably not an abstract and blind grammatical property of Expressives as a word class. It only takes place when some active iconic pattern would have been weakened or destroyed by an impending sound change. Otherwise, there are examples in Semai phonology of regular sound changes affecting Expressives and Prosaic words alike, presumably because they had no effect on iconicity values. Resistance, when it occurs, should therefore be viewed as an argument in favor of the presence of iconicity.

In a more general fashion, Expressive phonology tends to have fewer systematic gaps than Prosaic phonology. Expressives have a greater freedom to combine the sound units already available in the Prosaic part of the language, especially when such freedom enhances iconicity, which is the main property of Expressives. I have never seen a case where Mon-Khmer Expressives use "exotic" phonetic material. They only seem to elaborate on the existing sounds.

This leads us to a conclusion that Expressives are not a sort of "pre-linguistic" form of speech, somehow half-way between mimicry and fully structured linguistic form. They are, in fact, at the other end of the spectrum, a sort of "post-linguistic" stage where the structural elements necessary for prosaic language are deliberately re-arranged and exploited for their iconic properties, and used for aesthetic communication.

NOTES

[1] The reduplicated part /lən-/ shows that the main vowel of the root is /-ə-/; this makes it impossible to interpret ɲwən as being a poor notation for ɲuən: this would give luən-ɲuən as a reduplicated form.

[2] For example, I have found only two cases of Semai words with the r- -r configuration:

ɡcrɛɛr "one of the names of the bamboo-rat"

krər "a bird species (unidentified)"

These words are not Expressives in present day Semai, but their semantics and their unusual phonology suggests that they were drawn from that class some time ago.

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