SOUND SYMBOLISM AND KHASI ADVERBS

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Kharsi, a language of the Austro-Asiatic language family and spoken by about 300,000 speakers in the State of Meghalaya (formerly Western Assam), displays a fascinating array of verb qualifying adverbs. They fall into two classes, general adverbs and proper adverbs (Rabel 1961, p.63). General adverbs, which are few in number, occur with many different verbs: bha good, well, no to away, "e very, as in snew bha to feel well, le no to go away, klet no to forget completely, 1990 "e to be very much surprised. Proper adverbs act like satellites to a limited number of verbs only. These are the adverbs under discussion in this paper. Some verbs have a large number of satellite adverbs, others have only one or two. The number of adverbs seems to depend on the frequency of the verb itself. kren to speak has 77 adverbs, yaaj to go 66, and le to do has 150. The adverbs of le can be subdivided into those indicating the effects of mental states and feelings on the bodily features (38), dress and movements (61), cleanliness, thrift and extravagance (14), disposition of mind and character (37) (Bareh p.64 ff).

Since it would lead too far to demonstrate 150 examples I will use "iw to smell with its 15 satellites as an illustration.

"iw bi to have an aromatic sweet smell
"iw hek to be smelly
"iw jlep to smell of rotten fish
"iw jli to smell nauseating
"iw krteq to have a smell of a thing bearing that name
"iw khoq to have an unpleasant smell
"iw lhop to smell close and stuffy
"iw lli to smell of fresh fish
"iw lnaaw to have the smell of a long unoccupied house
IW pdu to have a slightly bad smell
IW riem to have a very bad smell
IW sit to smell of urine
IW sieg to have a pungent smell
IW sma to have a rotten smell
IW tug to stink

Could it be possible that the vowel i in the only two pleasant smells has any significance? or that the initial cluster j1- in jlep and jli denotes any similarity in meaning?

In preparing cards for my Khasi dictionary I noticed that adverbs - and even some verbs - of related meanings began with the same consonant clusters. The idea came to mind that certain sounds actually symbolized certain meanings in adverbs, and I began to assemble and classify initial consonant clusters according to large and not too narrowly defined semantic territories. There seem to be more Khasi adverbs with initial j and l than with any other sound; I therefore tabulated all adverbs with j- and l-, adding adverbs with k- for a more complete sampling.

I am herewith presenting my material which shall serve to illustrate a theory and not to prove a fact. I will indicate counter-evidence in appropriate places and will caution against too much confidence in my theory.

Sound symbolism works in more than one way: vowels in the adverb's major syllable (Rabel 1961 p.20) reflect the size of the person or object described by the adverb; these vowel values are quite predictable and can be compared to associating the i-vowel in the Germanic languages with smallness (teeny-weeny, itsy-bitsy, nitty-gritty) or Italian adjectival suffixes in -ino, -one, -accio and -uccio.

In the limited corpus chosen for this paper certain initial consonants or consonant clusters may relate to shape, position, protrusion, movement, noise, speed, and unpleasantness.

SHAPE. Adverbs whose first syllable begins with liquid + nasal are especially prominent in their designation of a person's or an object's shape.

lmoŋ out short (of small things)
lmuŋ out short (of big things)
lmaŋ-lmam fleshy (of a young baby)
lmm-nnum fleshy and plump (of an adult)
lmeŋ young looking inspite of old age

From these five examples one could isolate a morpheme l- and assign a meaning 'short and fleshy' to it. Further examples permit a more detailed morpheme lmmvC1:
Imman without ornament, cut off
Immen hands without fingers, feet without toes, cut off.
The foregoing examples are contradicted by Immu' branch with green leaves which seems to imply with projections intact so that I must revise Im- to mean with respect to projections or extensions.
From Imphoo smooth and small and Imphoo smooth and big one can isolate Imph- with a semantic designation smooth. The morpheme l9'oVC is exemplified by l9'an short and stout, l9'ien with hands on hips like a fat man, and l9'ur like a big circle. These three examples together with the noun ka l9'u9 circumference would allow me to assign a meaning 'of roundish proportions' to the morpheme. Unfortunately, I have an item that does not fit semantically, l9'u9 to be full of fire and smoke and perhaps I have to withdraw l9'oVC.

1?VC round and short derives from 1?a9 equat (persons), 1?ar short and round, and 1?oo9 beautifully round. 1kVC plump and equal derives from 1ker-1ker pulpy, flabby, 1kur-1kur nice and plump, 1kay plump, and 1kut short and square like a log. (1ko to fall apart would not fit this morpheme formula and therefore presents no counter-evidence.) 1kVC like a lonely left-over piece derives from 1kha9 lonely and helpless, 1khaay to be tender (of meat), 1khoj like a lonely little piece left over, 1khuj like a good solid piece left over, and ki 1khit small and useless things.

POSITION. An object, and sometimes a person or an animal, may be lying, standing, hanging or trailing:
\begin{itemize}
  \item yen kryep or kryap standing like a diseased fowl\(^2\)
  \item yen kr9an stand like a truant boy
  \item s9o9 kr9o9 stand like a modest little boy
  \item s9o9 krnaay stand in the same place
  \item kr9an aside, separately
  \item bha brrw khrwan khrwe9 be tall and handsome in stature.
\end{itemize}
We could isolate kry-, kr9-, krn-, krp-, and khrw- as morphemes 'in a standing position' because krw- and krs- do not refer to standing, so that we cannot call the minor syllable kr- by itself a morpheme.

Kntep cowardly, i.e. with drooping tail like a frightened fox or dog. Kntar, kntup and kntee all refer to a way of standing cowardly like a frightened fox or dog with a drooping tail, so that kntVC can be called standing cowardly.

Knthew with a long tail, in ragged clothes, knthey beautifully dressed with the boh-khaila flowing, and knthem flourishing an overlapping dhoti can be grouped under knthVC standing or walking with something trailing.\(^3\)
knji? raised on tįptoe, knjiŋ on tiptoe, knjooŋ high up on the top, and knjoŋ and knjooŋ aloft clearly contain a morpheme knjvc with the meaning raised up. This morpheme could perhaps be incorporated into knnvt like a bird's uplifted tail as illustrated by knnit lifted up like a bird's tail, knnet, knnut with a long and pointed tail of a big bird.

In all the foregoing examples the minor syllable kn- alone cannot be isolated because of its high frequency as the first syllable in countless nouns and verbs with unrelated meanings.

There are three possible morphemes for in a hanging or dangling position, krdvc, ldvc, and ljvŋ: deŋ to wear is used with krdat dangling, krdot hanging like a small ball, and krdut like a swollen earlobe, krdaap as if wearing something hanging, krdeep as if wearing an old coat. ŋat to fall into, to be caught in a snare is used with ldat hanging upside down, ldet dangling like a dead bird, and ldit dangling like a small bird. sdën to hang is used with lday dangling like a parrot, ldoŋ hanging like a small ball, and lduŋ hanging like a heavy ball. sdën is also used with ljɨŋ, ljëŋ, ljaoŋ, ljəŋ, and ljʊŋ all meaning hanging down without touching the ground.

knrvc could be glossed with horns: yeŋ knram or knrem means to stand with horns or moustache ends pointing in opposite directions and yeŋ knreŋ stand with long horns (like a stag or bull).

1bvc apparently means with flesh exposed from ka lboŋ the thigh, lbiŋ fleshy and big, lbaŋ with trousers rolled up, lboj and lbuj short and naked, and lbeŋ naked.

1ŋkvc means to lie flat on the ground deriving from 1ŋkraŋ and 1ŋkreŋ lying on the back like a drunkard, this? 1kdaŋ lying helpless on the back, 1ŋknap, 1ŋkniap, 1ŋkneŋ lying thin and flat like a coin, and ka 1ŋkneŋ the surface area.

PROTRUSION. knir with a small tail, kton like a small hill and kntoy like a small protruberance can be united under kntvc protruding.

SPEED. I found two examples where the final sounds could be isolated as possible morphemes CCEk and CCGŋ both with the meaning suddenly: baam klek to eat suddenly, phraay krek to sparkle suddenly, yeŋ khek to stop abruptly, and jleŋ at once. Further, miŋ phoŋ or miŋ jmoŋ to appear suddenly. Since such morpheme structures do not fit into the overall language pattern I will dismiss these examples as accidental.

NOISE. Only two examples can be united under k[h]rvc with a crash: kloon khram to fall with a crash and kram-kram, krum, krim with a crash.

Inthvc has the meaning destroy by throwing noisily derived from Inthem throw with stones, Intheer throw with stones continuously, and Inthaaw smash to pieces.
UNPLEASANTNESS. All words beginning with ja- and not continuing with 1º-, n-, or r- designate some kind of unpleasantness, most often carelessness or dirtiness: japhrut-japhret in a careless way, jawut-jawet work carelessly, ja-krak in a careless manner, kren ja-kter slur words like a drunkard, ja-knep to be sloppy, ja-khila to be dirty, ja-laua 5 with a dirty appearance, ja-te with something dirty sticking on the lips, ja-pneq sticky. Although I would like to establish a morpheme for careless and dirty I believe I cannot formulate it precisely enough to be convincing.

In the case of lº-, jrh-, and jrt- these doubts are not necessary: jrtVC sitting rude and lazy is derived from jrtvc to stretch the legs while sitting [impolite behavior], and jrtq to be lazy and indolent. thia? lºnqay to lie without a care, 5ºlºq lºmetro to sit with head thrown backwards, le? lºnqia? with head thrown backwards, and 5ºlºq lºmetroj to sit firmly with the whole weight of the body all express the same unacceptable, bad behavior. jrhVC means nose or throat trouble or having the symptoms of a head cold and is derived from jrh? to sneeze, jrhia? to choke, gag, and jrhº to cough.

My final example lhVC means a hollow with bad smell derived from lh? to foster more and more, lhqº to smell bad, lhene stagnant, lhinhin overflowing, lhone stagnant, and ka lhº valley, hollow. sqew lhqº stuffy stifling, and šit lhºep to be oppressively hot belong to the same morpheme.

I am on much firmer ground in associating vowel symbols with semantic content. The glosses in two Khasi dictionaries (Nissor Singh 1906, Kharkongngor) and explanations by my informants bear out the following vowel associations in adverbs which are about 90 percent reliable:

i, ie: small, light, dainty, cute;

ia: young, tender, thin, flat, pretty, modest, quick, attractive;

o, oo, vo: small, short, smooth, slender, delicate, feeble, pertaining to babies;

a, aa: medium-sized, small and flat, pertaining to stout persons;

e, ee: big, strong, tall, pertaining to grown-ups;

u: big, large, fat, ungainly, plump, fleshy, heavy, pertaining to old persons.

Many adverbs occur in partial or complete ablaut series ranging from two to five related forms. The following vowel alternations occur: i/e, a/e, e/u, o/u, a/u, i/a/e, i/a/o, i/e/u. Sometimes the entire series of i/i/a/o/a/e/u occurs. Although all of my examples can be found in the Khasi dictionaries, it is my feeling that proficient Khasi speakers can make up new forms on the spur of the moment using the
vocalic associations mentioned above. Examples:

\[\text{i/e} \quad \text{saat bha jlin to comb neatly} \]
\[\quad \text{jron jlen to be handsome/tall} \]
\[\quad \text{dem lpen to lie like a snake} \]
\[\quad \text{thia? lphen to lie like a fat and hefty person}^{6} \]
\[\quad \text{thia? lphin to lie like a small and thin person} \]
\[\quad \text{a/e} \quad \text{jem btaj-btaj or btej-btej to be sticky and muddy} \]
\[\quad \text{yaaj šen-šen to walk staggering} \]
\[\quad \text{yaaj šan-šan to walk like a drunkard} \]
\[\quad \text{o/u} \quad \text{spoŋ knthrong to wear something creas-like (e.g. a turban)} \]
\[\quad \quad \text{(by a small person)} \]
\[\quad \quad \text{spoŋ knthrung to wear s. like a turban (by an older person)} \]
\[\quad \quad \text{yaaj dot-dot to walk shakily like an old man (small)} \]
\[\quad \quad \text{yaaj dut-dut to walk shakily like a bigger person} \]
\[\quad \quad \text{sñaaj tkor-tkor to be fat and tender (a small animal)} \]
\[\quad \quad \text{sñaaj tkur-tkur to be fat and tender (bigger animal)} \]
\[\quad \quad \text{ia/e} \quad \text{riaŋ jriŋ or jroŋ to dress nicely} \]
\[\quad \text{ia/a/e} \quad \text{ŋkniap, ŋknap, ŋknap flat on the ground (for objects thin} \]
\[\quad \quad \text{and small, thin and medium, thin and big)} \]
\[\quad \text{i/a/e} \quad \text{jrtęŋ ltr, ltor, lter to stretch one's legs at full length} \]
\[\quad \quad \text{rit jkiŋ to be small, but straight and slender} \]
\[\quad \quad \text{jron jkaŋ or jken to be tall and slender} \]
\[\quad \text{i/e/u} \quad \text{dem knnit to sit with the tail lifted up (small bird)} \]
\[\quad \quad \text{jron knnut or knnut with the tail lifted up (bigger bird)} \]
\[\quad \quad \text{oo/uo} \quad \text{bha briw lmphoŋ or lmphuoŋ to be beautifully smooth} \]
\[\quad \text{a/o/e} \quad \text{jem krwop, krwop, or krwep to be easily bent, pliable} \]
\[\quad \text{a/ia/o/e/u} \quad \text{dem to lie, sit is used with} \]
\[\quad \quad \text{ŋsnap the way a moth sits on the window pane} \]
\[\quad \quad \text{ŋsniap the way a beautiful butterfly sits} \]
\[\quad \quad \text{ŋsnop the way a baby chick sits} \]
\[\quad \quad \text{ŋsnep the way a frog sits} \]
\[\quad \quad \text{ŋsnup the way a turtle sits} \]

Perhaps one third of all adverbs are reduplicated, most often resulting in a simple repetition of the adverb itself: jem jer-jer to be soft like jelly, jem tını-tın to be pliable like a string, jem smop-smop to be soft and slimy, dap klaŋ-klaŋ how a place full of water glitters, jaaw jop-jop to fall in drops, šon kjoŋ-kjoŋ to sit high up in a tree (like birds), laʔ ley-ley to be able to without fail, wan kum-kum to be actively engaged in, luŋ jiap-jiap to be very young and tender, jhiʔ jaw-jaw to be in wet clothes. Most of the reduplicated forms seem to have reiterative force.
A few of the reduplicated adverbs display two different vowels, thus combining e.g. the vowel for small o with that for huge u or that of huge with that of ungainly e. It is possible that such an adverb has a generalizing function: khmi’ luŋ-luŋ leŋ-leŋ to search hurriedly, leŋ japhret-japhret to act in a careless way, trey jawut-jawet to work carelessly, baam jrup-jrap to eat at the same time, yatrey hjup-hjap to work simultaneously, ja-tmut ja-tmat to be covered with dirt and grime, jirwit-jirwat act in a round-about way, wasting time.

/a vowel alternations usually occur in a doubly reduplicated adverb: knja’ jik-jik jak-jak to be absolutely silent or knja’ jlim-jlim jlam-jlam with the same meaning, thyan liw-liw laaw-laaw to be hungry or craving for something. The concept of size, i.e. small vs. medium sized, cannot possibly play a role here, rather I believe that the adverb has a superlative force.

Such reduplicated adverbs are sometimes used as verbs or as nouns: loy-loy luy-luy to be tender-hearted or innocent, li-li pem-pem to be destitute, ki tum ki tam articles of furniture, ki tiar ki tar things lying around, īkrum īkrum with the same meaning, ka lat-lat a current. I assume the function of double reduplication here is distributive.

The Khasi language has adverbs for every situation in life, for every smell, noise, size, speed, mood, and feeling. It takes training and love for the language to become proficient in the use of the proper adverb for every occasion. Since many young Khasis are being educated entirely in English-speaking colleges it is unfortunately possible that such versatility of language is becoming a lost art for the young generation.
SUMMARY

ja--- unpleasant, dirty
jrh--- with symptoms of a headcold
jrt--- sitting rude and lazily
knj-- raised up
knnt-- like a bird's uplifted tail
knr-- with horns
knt-- protruding; standing cowardly
knth-- standing or walking with something trailing
krd-- in a hanging or dangling position
krn--
krq--
krp-- } in a standing position
kry--
khrw--
kh[hr]-- with a crash
l?-- round and short
lb-- with flesh exposed
ld-- } in a hanging or dangling position
lh-- a hollow with bad smell
lk-- plump and squat
lkh-- like a lonely left-over piece
lm-- short and fleshy
lmm-- with respect to projections or extensions
lmph-- smooth
lnth-- destroy by throwing noisily
ln-- sitting impolitely
ln?-- of roundish proportions
lnk-- lying flat on the ground

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NOTES

1. V = vowel, C = consonant

2. The first word in these examples is a verb; verbs are listed whenever possible and omitted in case of doubt.

3. kn- and knh- should probably be considered related morphemes, both semantically and phonologically; Eugenie J. A. Henderson apparently agrees to some degree with Peter Schmidt's theories on this topic - see her forthcoming papers in Oceanic Linguistics (Proceedings of the First International Conference on Austro-Asiatic Linguistics, January, 1973, Honolulu.)

4. krVC and khVC are to be considered related - see note 3.

5. The hyphen indicates an internal open juncture to show that the words are not to be read *jai-baan, *jai-be, *jap-nek.

6. lpen and lphen probably represent related morphemes - see note 3.
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