

SOUND SYMBOLISM AND KHASI ADVERBS

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Khasi, 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? away, ?e? very*, as in *snew bha to feel well, le? no? to go away, klet no? to forget completely, lngo? ?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, *yaa? 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 krteŋ to have a smell of a thing bearing that name*
- ?iw khoŋ to have an unpleasant smell*
- ?iw lhop to smell close and stuffy*
- ?iw li to smell of fresh fish*
- ?iw lngaaw 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 sien to have a pungent smell
 ?iw sma to have a rotten smell
 ?iw tun to stink

Could it be possible that the vowel *i* in the only two pleasant smells has any significance? or that the initial cluster *ji-* 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.

- lmoñ* out short (of small things)
lmuñ out short (of big things)
lman-lman fleshy (of a young baby)
lmum-lmum fleshy and plump (of an adult)
lme? young looking inspite of old age

From these five examples one could isolate a morpheme *lm-* and assign a meaning '*short and fleshy*' to it. Further examples permit a more detailed morpheme *lmmVC*¹:

Immaŋ 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 *Imm-* to mean *with respect to projections or extensions*.

From *Imphooñ smooth and small* and *Imphuñ smooth and big* one can isolate *Imph-* with a semantic designation *smooth*. The morpheme *lŋ'VC* is exemplified by *lŋ'an short and stout*, *lŋ'ien with hands on hips like a fat man*, and *lŋ'ur like a big circle*. These three examples together with the noun *ka lŋ'uñ circumference* would allow me to assign a meaning 'of roundish proportions' to the morpheme. Unfortunately, I have an item that does not fit semantically, *lŋ'u' to be full of fire and smoke* and perhaps I have to withdraw *lŋ'VC*.

l'VC round and short derives from *l'añ squat (persons)*, *l'ar short and round*, and *l'ooñ beautifully round*. *lkVC plump and squat* derives from *lker-lker pulpy, flabby*, *lkur-lkur nice and plump*, *lkay plump*, and *lkut short and square like a log*. (*lko to fall apart* would not fit this morpheme formula and therefore presents no counter-evidence.) *lkhVC like a lonely left-over piece* derives from *lkhaŋ lonely and helpless*, *lkhaay to be tender (of meat)*, *lkhoj like a lonely little piece left over*, *lkhuŋ like a good solid piece left over*, and *ki lkhut small and useless things*.

POSITION. An object, and sometimes a person or an animal, may be lying, standing, hanging or trailing:

*yeŋ kryep or kryap standing like a diseased fowl*²

yeŋ krŋaŋ stand like a truant boy

šoŋ krŋoŋ stand like a modest little boy

šoŋ krnaay stand in the same place

krpaŋ aside, separately

bha briw khrwan khrwe' be tall and handsome in stature.

We could isolate *kry-*, *krŋ-*, *kryn-*, *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 *knteer* 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, *knthay beautifully dressed with the boh-khaila flowing*, and *knthem flourishing an over-lapping dhoti* can be grouped under *knthVC standing or walking with something trailing*.³

knji? *raised on tiptoe*, knjiŋ *on tiptoe*, knjoŋ *high up on the top*, and knjoñ and knjuoñ *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: den *to wear* is used with krdat *dangling*, krdot *hanging like a small ball*, and krduŋ *like a swollen earlobe*, krdaap *as if wearing something hanging*, krdeep *as if wearing an old coat*. nat *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*. sdien *to hang* is used with lday *dangling like a parrot*, ldoy *hanging like a small ball*, and lduy *hanging like a heavy ball*. sdien is also used with ljiŋ, ljeŋ, ljaŋ, ljoŋ, and ljuŋ 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)*.

lbVC 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 lbew *naked*.

lŋkCVC means *to lie flat on the ground* deriving from lŋkraŋ and lŋkreŋ *lying on the back like a drunkard*, thia? lkdaŋ *lying helpless on the back*, lŋknap, kŋkniap, lŋknep *lying thin and flat like a coin*, and ka lŋknep *the surface area*.

PROTRUSION. kntir *with a small tail*, knton *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 CCoŋ both with the meaning *suddenly*: baam klek *to eat suddenly*, phrnaay kreŋ *to sparkle suddenly*, yeŋ kheŋ *to stop abruptly*, and jlek *at once*. Further, mi? phŋoŋ or mi? 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]rVC⁴ *with a crash*: klloŋ khram *to fall with a crash* and kram-kram, krum, krim *with a crash*.

lnthVC has the meaning *destroy by throwing noisily* derived from lnthem *throw with stones*, lntheer *throw with stones continuously*, and lnthaaw *smash to pieces*.

UNPLEASANTNESS. All words beginning with ja- and not continuing with lʔ-, 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-khlia *to be dirty*, ja-lbaaŋ⁵ *with a dirty appearance*, ja-tbe *with something dirty sticking on the lips*, ja-pnek *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 lŋ-, jrŋ-, and jrt- these doubts are not necessary: jrtVC *sitting rude and lazy* is derived from jrtien *to stretch the legs while sitting* [impolite behavior], and jrten *to be lazy and indolent*. thiaʔ lŋŋay *to lie without a care*, šŋ lŋŋeʔ *to sit with head thrown backwards*, leʔ lŋŋiaʔ *with head thrown backwards*, and šŋ lŋŋej *to sit firmly with the whole weight of the body* all express the same unacceptable, bad behavior. jrŋVC means *nose or throat trouble* or *having the symptoms of a head cold* and is derived from jrhiʔ *to sneeze*, jrhiaʔ *to choke, gag*, and jrŋoʔ *to cough*.

My final example lhVC means *a hollow with bad smell* derived from lhiʔ *to fester more and more*, lhoʔ *to smell bad*, lhen *stagnant*, lhin-lhin *overflowing*, lhon *stagnant*, and ka lhuʔ *valley, hollow*. sŋew lhop *stuffy stifling*, and šit lhep *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, uo: *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/ia/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:

- i/e saat bha jlin *to comb neatly*
 jron jlen *to be handsomely tall*
 dem lpen *to lie like a snake*
 thia' lphen *to lie like a fat and hefty person*⁶
 thia' lphin *to lie like a small and thin person*
- a/e jem btaj-btaj or btej-btej *to be sticky and muddy*
 yaaʒ šen-šen *to walk staggeringly*
 yaaʒ šan-šan *to walk like a drunkard*
- o/u spon knthron *to wear something crest-like (e.g. a turban)*
 (by a small person)
 spon knthruŋ *to wear s. like a turban (by an older person)*
 yaaʒ dot-dot *to walk shakily like an old man (small)*
 yaaʒ dut-dut *to walk shakily like a bigger person*
 sqaaʒ tkor-tkor *to be fat and tender (a small animal)*
 sqaaʒ tkur-tkur *to be fat and tender (bigger animal)*
- ia/e riam jrian or jren *to dress nicely*
- ia/a/e lqkniap, lqknap, lqknep *flat on the ground (for objects thin*
 and small, thin and medium, thin and big)
- i/a/e jrtren ltir, ltar, lter *to stretch one's legs at full length*
 rit jkin *to be small, but straight and slender*
 jron jkan or jken *to be tall and slender*
- i/e/u dem knnit *to sit with the tail lifted up (small bird)*
 jron knnet or knnut *with the tail lifted up (bigger bird)*
- oo/uo bha briw lphooñ or lphuon *to be beautifully smooth*
- a/o/e jem krwap, krwop, or krwep *to be easily bent, pliable*
- a/ia/o/e/u dem *to lie, sit* is used with
 lqsnap *the way a moth sits on the window pane*
 lqsniaʒ *the way a beautiful butterfly sits*
 lqsnop *the way a baby chick sits*
 lqsnep *the way a frog sits*
 lqsnup *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 tin-tin *to be pliable like a string*, jem smop-smop *to be soft and slimy*, dap klan-*klan how a place full of water glitters*, jaaw jop-jop *to fall in drops*, šon kjoñ-kjoñ *to sit high up in a tree (like birds)*, la' ley-*ley to be able to without fail*, wan kum-kum *to be actively engaged in*, lun jiap-jiap *to be very young and tender*, jhr' 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*, *le' japhrut-japhret to act in a careless way*, *trey jawut-jawet to work carelessly*, *baam jrup-jrap to eat at the same time*, *yatrej jhup-jhap to work simultaneously*, *ja-tmut ja-tmat to be covered with dirt and grime*, *jirwit-jirwat act in a round-about way, wasting time*.

i/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, *thnan 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*, *lŋkrum lŋkram* 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--	<i>unpleasant, dirty</i>
jrh---	<i>with symptoms of a headcold</i>
jrt--	<i>sitting rude and lazily</i>
knj--	<i>raised up</i>
knn-t	<i>like a bird's uplifted tail</i>
knr--	<i>with horns</i>
knt--	<i>protruding; standing cowardly</i>
knth--	<i>standing or walking with something trailing</i>
krd--	<i>in a hanging or dangling position</i>
krn--	<i>in a standing position</i>
krη--	
krp--	
kry--	
khrr--	
k[h]r--	<i>with a crash</i>
l°--	<i>round and short</i>
lb--	<i>with flesh exposed</i>
ld--	<i>in a hanging or dangling position</i>
lj--	
lh--	<i>a hollow with bad smell</i>
lk--	<i>plump and squat</i>
lkh--	<i>like a lonely left-over piece</i>
lm--	<i>short and fleshy</i>
lmm--	<i>with respect to projections or extensions</i>
lmp--	<i>smooth</i>
lnth--	<i>destroy by throwing noisily</i>
lη--	<i>sitting impolitely</i>
lη°--	<i>of roundish proportions</i>
lηk--	<i>lying flat on the ground</i>

N O T E S

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. *knt-* and *knth-* should probably be considered related morphemes, both semantically and phonologically; Eugenie J.A. Henderson apparently agrees to some degree with Pater 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 **jal-baañ*, **jat-be*, **jap-nek*.
6. *lpen* and *lphen* probably represent related morphemes - see note 3.

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