The sound symbolic system in Lao

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Introduction

The relationship between sound and meaning of a word has been studied for many decades. It is generally accepted that the relationship is arbitrary. Those phonemes signify no semantic feature.

However, there are some words or word class that is believed to be able to signify semantic features. In English, for example, it has been said that fl- can signify "movement" like in flow, flake, flutter, flap, flicker, fling, flit, flur, flirt, or that gl- implies "illumination" like in glow, glare, and gloom (Jespersen, 1922). In Thai, some believe that η- signifies the feature of "bent, crooked" like "ηηηιηιηιηιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιιиииии

For many years, linguists have found that there is in the lexicon of many languages a class of word which their sounds seemingly signify the semantic features of a word. This class of words has been named "ideophone"
To mention but a few, Clement M. Doke (1935:118) defined it as "a word, often onomatopoetic, which describes a predicate, qualificative or adverb in respect to manner, colour, sound, action, state, or intensity." Fordyce (1988) defined it as "an ideophone is a member of a set of words with a phonologically determined semantic feature or field."


In Lao, Crisfield (1978) has found that the same stem of ideophone with different vowels signify different shapes and sizes of things they describe, for example:

\[kʰiit \, liit \ "very small thin and long \ (thing)\]  
\[kʰeet \, lɛet \ "flat and long \ (thing)\]  
\[kʰɛet \, lɛɛt \ "very flat and long \ (thing)\]  
\[kʰaat \, laat \ "very big and long \ (thing)\]  
\[kʰoɔt \, lɔɔt \ "big and round long \ (thing)\]  
\[kʰɔɔt \, lɔɔt \ "very small round and long \ (thing)\]
It is clear from the above that high front vowel /i/ and front vowels with spread lips /e, e/ signify the features of "small" and "flat" respectively, and /a/ (low open vowel) signifies the feature of "big" and back vowels with rounded lips signify the feature of "round". The phonetic motivation or iconicity of vowels for these semantic feature are, therefore, explainable.

In this article, I will present that not only the vowels but also the reduplication, the consonants and tones can signify some semantic features. The analysis based on the data collected from a Vientiane speaker.

The Categories of Ideophones in Lao

The ideophones in Lao or in any other languages, I believe, can be categorized into eight groups according to the modes of sensory perception they describe. (parenthesis is optional)

2.1 Ideophones describing sounds:
ηηη (ηηη) "a sound of a small bell ringing"
пок (пок) "the sound of water dropping"

2.2 Ideophones describing appearances or shapes/sizes
Ex. кхон жон "be skinny (as of an old man)"
пхаа наха "be spread wide (as of a mushroom)"

2.3 Ideophones describing manners of action:
Ex. кхоа ка "of walking with legs widely apart"
кховъ жо "of jumping (as of a small frog)"
2.4 Ideophones describing colors:
   Ex. ćiñ khìiŋ "red as of burning charcoal"
        khìi lìi "black as of charcoal"

2.5 Ideophones describing tastes:
   Ex. ʔam ʔam "bitter (but a good taste)"
        ʔuaj luaj "sweet as of sugar"

2.6 Ideophones describing smellings:
   Ex. หวย (hui) "good smell as of roasted fish"
        tiŋ (tiŋ) "bad smell as of urine"

2.7 Ideophones describing feelings:
   Ex. ʔup (tup) "painful as of wound"
        hum (hum) "warm slightly"

2.8 Ideophones describing state of things:
   Ex. ʔèʔ ʔ₁céʔ "soft as of a rotten fruit"
        miit miit "wet as of a wet towel"

The syntactic characteristic of ideophones in Lao

Ideophones are included in the category of adverb, modifying verb and adjectival verb, but different from other subcategories in which ideophones occur after only a specific verb or other semantically related verbs, whereas adverbs are not selectively restricted. For example, caaj waaj can occur after điiŋ "red", not be after dam "black" or khaaw "white" which need other ideophones: khìi lìi and ʔòok lòok respectively.
Reduplication of the ideophones in Lao

The ideophones in Lao can be formally classified

2 kinds of roots: monosyllabic (as in 2.1, 2.6, 2.7) and
disyllabic roots (as in 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 2.5, 2.8)

Reduplication of ideophonic root signify 2

1. the continuity of happenings. For 2.1,2.3,2.6,2.7
categories, they can be reduplicated into two or more
reduplicated forms depending on how long or how many times
the happenings occur.

Ex. ตั้ง ตั้ง ตั้ง ตั้ง "sound of a bell ringing"
ก้อง ก้อง ก้อง ก้อง "manner of a small frog jumping"

ชน ชน "bad smell as of urine"

หัว หัว หัว หัว "good smell as of roasted fish"

ตุ้ม ตุ้ม ตุ้ม ตุ้ม "feeling of headache"

2. the plurality of thing, manner of action, taste, color
etc. All categories (2.1-2.8) can be reduplicated, modifying
vowel quality in the reduplicated forms to show the plurality
or the difference.

Ex. ตั้ง ตั้ง ตั้ง ตั้ง "different sound of bells ringing"
ก้อง ก้อง ก้อง ก้อง "different manners of small frogs
 jumping"

เขียว เขียว เขียว เขียว "black as of many charcoal"

กั้น กั้น กั้น กั้น "different sizes"

؟้า ้า ้า ้า "many sweet taste"

มิต มิต มิต มิต "wet as of many wet towels
with different sizes"
The sound symbolism of consonants and tones

The iconic mechanism of vowels in ideophones is fairly clear. (see Crisfield, 1978; Theraphan, 1979; and more details in Thananan, 1992), but not be so for the consonant or tone. Here, I will present only some which I believe seemingly signify some semantic features.

**Final consonants.** Final stop consonants signify the abrupt ending of sound and movement whereas final nasals, semivowels or none signify the lingering sense of sound, smell, taste, light, feeling and the smooth ending of movement. Consider the following pairs of ideophones:

- **tɛŋ** "sound of a bell ringing"
- **tɛk** "sound of knocking a stick of wood"
- **khɔk jɔk** "manner of jumping with abrupt ending"
- **khɔŋ jɔŋ** "manner of jumping with smooth ending"
- **hui hui** "good smell..."
- **hup hup**
- **ʔam lam** "bitter (but a good taste)"
- **ʔap lap**
- **cɪɪŋ kʰɪɪŋ** "red as of burning charcoal"
- **cɪɪk kʰɪɪk**
- **hum hum** "feeling of warmth"
- **hup hup**
Initial consonants. Initial stop consonants seemingly signify a sudden happening or forceful movement whereas nasal consonants signify flexibility of movement or of thing.

pat pat    "manner of a fish struggling"
mat mat    "material object"
 núi núi    "describing the softness of a balloon"
cuí cui

Tones. There is only one pair of ideophone showing that low tone signifies more intense than mid tone does.

(nak) oon noon "heavy (rock)"
(nak) óon nóon "rather heavy (rock)"

Conclusion
Initial-final consonants, vowels and tones in ideophones cooperatively signify some semantic features. But to show these, one has to analyse the data critically. The big problem is that sometimes the informant cannot explain the meaning of an ideophone thoroughly, therefore, we cannot extract the semantic features signified by its sound. It would be better if the linguist is a native speaker of the language.
NOTES:

Markers:
\[ \because \text{rising tone} \]
\[ \wedge \text{falling tone} \]
\[ \wedge \text{mid level tone} \]
\[ \vee \text{high level tone} \]
\[ \wedge \text{low level tone} \]

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