

## 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 n- signifies the feature of "bent, crooked" like in nok, nip, noon, num, noon and the feature of "dull, stupid" like in noo, nau, num, naam. But we often encounter the exception with the opposite feature from the above like in not, naam "beautiful, elegant"

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 onomatopoeic, 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."

Such ideophones have been studied in many languages as Semai, a Mon-khmer language (Diffloth, 1976) Standard Thai (Payom, 1976) Korean (Kong On Kim, 1977) Rengao, a Mon-khmer (Gregerson, 1984) Japanese (Hamano, 1986) Yoruba, an African language (Fordyce, 1988) Chinese Shan or Tai Nuea (Thananan, 1992)

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)"**

**khêet lêet "flat and long (thing)"**

**khêet lêet "very flat and long (thing)"**

**khaat laät "very big and long (thing)"**

**khoot loôt "big and round long (thing)"**

**khôot lôot "very small round and long (thing)"**

It is clear from the above that high front vowel /i/ and front vowels with spread lips /e, ε/ 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 features 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"

pok (pok) "the sound of water dropping"

#### 2.2 Ideophones describing appearances or shapes/sizes

Ex. khôn jôn "be skinny (as of an old man)"

phâa nâa "be spread wide (as of a mushroom)"

#### 2.3 Ideophones describing manners of action :

Ex. kaη ka "of walking with legs widely apart"

khəʔ jəʔ "of jumping (as of a small frog)"

## 2.4 Ideophones describing colors :

Ex. ciɿŋ khiɿŋ "red as of burning charcoal"

khīi līi "black as of charcoal"

## 2.5 Ideophones describing tastes :

Ex. ʔam lam "bitter (but a good taste)"

ʔuaj luaj "sweet as of sugar"

## 2.6 Ideophones describing smellings :

Ex. hui (hui) "good smell as of roasted fish"

tīŋ (tīŋ) "bad smell as of urine"

## 2.7 Ideophones describing feelings :

Ex. tup (tup) "painful as of wound"

hum (hum) "warm slightly"

## 2.8 Ideophones describing state of things :

Ex. ʔeʔ ʔleʔ "soft as of a rotten fruit"

mīit nīit "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 dɛŋ "red", not be after dam "black" or khaaw "white" which need other ideophones : khīi līi and ʔoók loók respectively.

## Reduplication of the ideophones in Lao

The ideophones in Lao can be formally classified into 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 semantic features :

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. **tən tən tən tən** "sound of a bell ringing"  
**khɔjɔ? khɔjɔ? khɔjɔ?** "manner of a small frog jumping"  
**tîn tîn** "bad smell as of urine"  
**hui hui hui hui** "good smell as of roasted fish"  
**tup tup tup tup** "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. **tin̄ tən̄ tən̄** "different sound of bells ringing"  
**khɔ̄ jɔ̄ khɛ̄ jɛ̄** "different manners of small frogs jumping"  
**khīi līi khīi līi** "black as of many charcoal with different sizes"  
**ʔuaj luaj ʔaaj laaj** "many sweet taste"  
**mīit nīit mīit nīit** "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"

khok jok "manner of jumping with abrupt ending"

khôn jôn "manner of jumping with smooth ending"

hui hui "good smell..."

\*hup hup

\*am lam "bitter(but a good taste)"

\*lap lap

ciin khiin "red as of burning charcoal"

\*ciik khiik

hum hum "feeling of warmth"

\*hup hup

**Initial consonants.** Initial stop consonants : 3270V  
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

nũĩ nũĩ "describing the softness of a balloon"

\*cui 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) ōon nōon "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 :**

the markers

✓ : rising tone

^ : falling tone

⤴ : mid level tone

⤵ : high level tone

— : low level tone

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