Lao expressives

Ratree WAYLAND
Cornell University

1. Introduction[1]

It has long been recognized that language has two types of signs, one of which is purely 'differential' or 'distinctive', and the other of which is 'significative' and 'meaningful'. Distinctive features and phonemes as bundles of distinctive features belong to the first type while morphemes, words, phrases, sentences and so on belong to the second (Waugh 1987:157). Distinctive features, the smallest sign of the first type, are significative because they differentiate words of unlike meaning. They carry the properties of sound which are capable of discriminating words of different meaning. Since they are only 'sense discriminative', they have an 'indirect' or a 'mediated' relation to meaning (Waugh 1987:160). It is only through their use as the signans of another sign, e.g. words, that they may be associated with meaning. The word itself, on the other hand, has a 'direct', 'immediate' and 'non-mediated' relation to meaning (Waugh 1987:160).

Research on child language acquisition, speech production and perception, discourse analysis, language structure and so forth has shown that speech sound is 'multifunctional'. In other words, speech sound is a complex, mutilayered and hierarchical signal with a variety of components and functions, i.e. distinctive and significative. Unlike distinctive features, redundant features, expressive features, stylistic feature and configurative features in the phonic properties of speech sound are significative and have a 'direct', 'unmediated' relation to meaning (Waugh 1987:160) Simply stated, there is a direct relationship between significative properties of speech sound and its meaning. This relationship may be studied through iconicity.

While evidence of iconicity in Indo-European languages may be scarce and sporadic,[2] the phenomenon has been reported for several Southeast Asian

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[2] However, for a discussion of sound symbolism in English see Waugh (1992).

languages, especially those of the Mon-Khmer family (Banker 1964; Diffloth 1972, 1976, 1979, 1994; Durand 1961; Haas 1942, 1946; Henderson 1965, 1976a, 1976b; Jacob 1979; Rabel-Heyman 1976; Smith 1973). To my knowledge, only five published works reported on Lao have touched on iconicity (Prakhong 1976; Premchu 1979; Theraphan 1979; Sudtasorn 1987; Chamberlain 1992).

In this paper I propose to provide more data to support the existence of iconicity in language by putting a class of the Lao lexicon called 'Expressives' (Diffloth, 1972) under the iconic lens and examining cues to meaning in its forms. Pierce (1902) proposed three different types of icons, i.e. image, diagram and metaphor. However, only image and diagram will be discussed in this study. Not only the phonology, but also the syntax and semantics of expressives will also be discussed. The Lao dialect being investigated is the one spoken in Klang Noi (henceforth KN) Village, Udornthani Province, Thailand.

2. Brief overview of phonological system of KN Lao dialect

2.1 Consonant system

a. Initial consonants

	Labial	Labio-dental	Alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Stops						
vls unasp.	p		t*	c	k	?
vls asp.	pʰ		tʰ		kʰ	h
vd.	b		d			
Fricatives		f	s			
Sonorants						
nasals	m		n	ɲ	ŋ	
lateral			l			
glides	w			j		

Notes: There are no consonant clusters
       [t] is usually dental

b. Final consonants

p		t		k	?
m		n		ŋ	
w		j			

2.2 Vowel system

a. Monophthongs

	Front	Back unrounded	Back rounded
High	i, iː	(ɨ), ɨː	u, uː
Mid	e, eː	ə, əː	o, oː
Low	ɛ, ɛː	a, aː	ɔ, ɔː

b. Diphthongs   ia   (ia, ua)
Note: ɨ and ia are rare

2.3 Tone system

a. Live syllables

Open or live syllables (i.e., syllables ending with vowels, nasals, or glides) in KN dialect may have one of the following five tones:
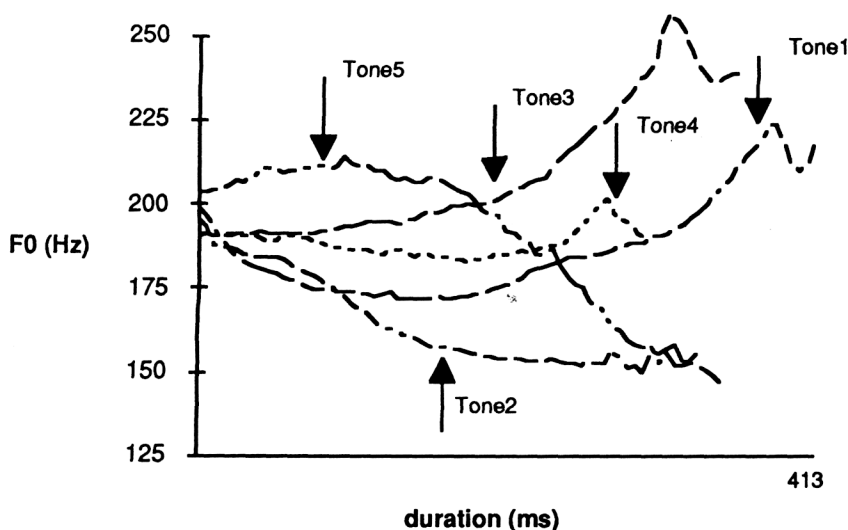

Figure 1. Pitch tracks of five tones in live syllables of KN Lao words in isolation as spoken by a female speaker.

Tone 1 Mid-falling-rising tone: starts at mid pitch level, gradually lowering to mid-low level before rising to a higher pitch level, often with a fall and rise at the end.

[kʰaː¹]   'leg'
[huː¹]   'ear'
[hua¹]   'head'

Tone 2 Low tone: starts at mid pitch level and gradually lowers to low pitch level at the end, sometimes accompanied by creaky voice or glottalization (henceforth GL).

[piː²]   'year'
[bin²]   'fly'
[kin²]   'eat'
[kʰaj²(GL)]   'fever'
[kʰaw²(GL)]   'rice'

Tone 3 High-rising tone: starts at mid pitch level, rises to high pitch level at the end.

[miː³]   'hand'
[maː³]   'come'
[kʰuaj³]   'water buffalo'

Tone 4 Mid-level tone: starts at high-mid pitch level and remains at that level throughout, sometimes with a short rise, and falls towards the end.

[baːw⁴]   'young man'
[baː⁴]   'shoulder'
[kaj⁴]   'chicken'

Tone 5 High- rising-falling tone: starts at high pitch level, rises and then falls to low pitch level, often with glottalization at the end.

[maj⁵]   'wood'
[naːm⁵]   'water'
[baːn⁵]   'village'

b. Dead syllables

Dead or checked syllables (i.e. syllables ending with stop consonants) may occur with the following four tones:
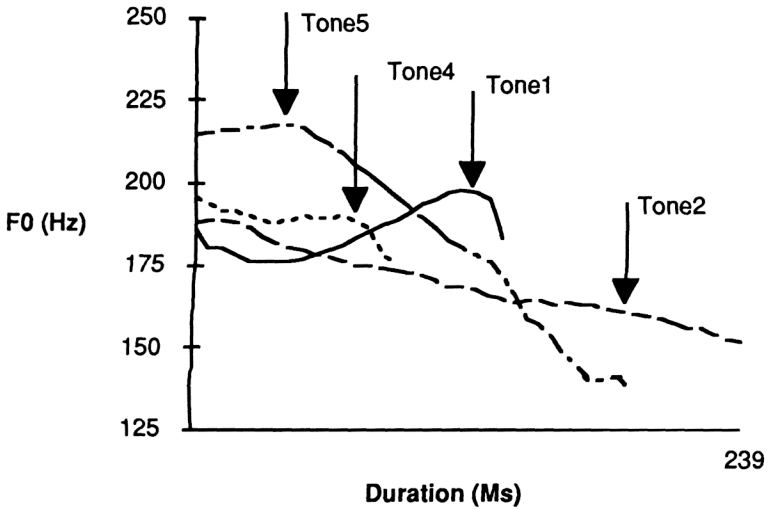
Figure 2. Pitch tracks of four tones in checked syllables of KN Lao words in isolation as spoken by a female speaker.

Tone 1   Mid-falling-rising tone: starts at mid pitch level, lowers and then gradually rises to a high-mid pitch level before falling again at the end.

[pʰak¹]	'vegetable'
[mat¹]	'flea'
[dip¹]	'raw'

Tone 2   Low tone: starts at mid pitch level and gradually lowers to low pitch level. When the end of the tone is exaggeratedly low, vocal fry may give rise to creakiness.

[haːp²]	'to carry with a pole'
[peːt²]	'eight'
[pɔːt²]	'lung'
[deːt²]	'sunlight'

Tone 4   High-mid-level tone: starts at high-mid pitch level and slightly lowers and remains at that level before falling at the end.

[lak⁴]	'steal'
[mat⁴]	'tie'
[nok⁴]	'bird'

Tone 5   High-falling tone: starts at high pitch level, slightly rises and then falls to low pitch level, often with glottalization (GL) at the end.

[mi:t^5]   'knife'
[lu:k^5]   'offspring'
[liat^5]   'blood'

3. Lao iconicity

Like several Mon-Khmer languages, Lao has words such as [ʔɔŋ^4 lɔŋ^4] 'description of the appearance of a small (round) object floating in the water', and [ʔoːŋ^4 loːŋ^4] 'description of the appearance of a big (round) object floating in the water', as a basic part of speech which has no equivalent in most Western languages. In the past, several terms have been used by several linguists to label this curious word class. The term 'phonaesthetic words' was used by Henderson (1965), 'impressifs' by Durand (1961); Vietnamese linguists divided it into 'tươɳg thanh' (sound imitative) and 'tươɳg hình' (form imitative). Following Diffloth (1972), the term 'expressive' will be employed in this study.

Most Lao expressives seem to consist of two syllables; both either closed or open. The rimes of these two syllables are usually identical. But the initials often differ in the first and second word.[3] Specifically, if the syllable structure of an expressive is CVT(C) CVT(C), the -VT(C) or the vowel and the final consonant plus the tone are referred to as a rime, and it is (with a few exceptions) usually identical in both syllables. Examples of some Lao expressives of this type are given below:

3.1 Expressives of C1VT C2VT type

[kɔː^4 dɔː^4]   Description of the way in which a small and short object
                           protrudes or sticks out (e.g. a child's penis, animals' tail)
[koː^4 do^4]   Description of the way in which a big and long object
                           protrudes or sticks out (e.g. an adult's penis, a big tree
                           branch)
[kʰɔː^2 lɔː^2]   Description of a small , short, (round) object (e.g. baby's
                           leg, a link of sausage)
[kʰoː^2 lo^2]   Description of a big , (round) object (e.g. a log)
[cɔː^4 kɔː^4]   Description of the way a small child or animal sits looking
                           subdued or defeated
[coː^{4}koː^4]   Description of the way an adult or a big animal sits looking
                           subdued or defeated.

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[3] Even though they are comparatively fewer than two-syllable expressives with different initials, two-syllable expressives with identical initials also exist, e.g. pi:^{5} pi:^{5} 'intensely black (in a small area)', pi:^{5} pi:^{5} 'very black (comparatively in a larger area)'; hiːn^3 hiːn^3 'description of redness of small flame or small object'; huːn^{3}huːn^3 'description of redness which covers a (circular) larger area, e.g. an infected swollen red arm'; mup^{4}mup^4 or mip^{4}mip^4 'description of a throbbing pain'.

[cɔː ^{4} vɔː ^{4}]   Description of the way a person listens agape with small
                      size mouth-opening
[coː ^{4}voː ^{4}]   Description of the way in which a person listens agape
                      with a bigger mouth-opening
[ʔɔː ^{5} pɔː ^{5}]   Description of a small round object (e.g. a bundle)
[ʔoː ^{5} poː ^{5}]   Description of a big, round object (e.g. a big bundle)

3.2 Expressives of CVTC CVTC type

[tɔːt ^{2} pɔːt ^{2}]   Description of the appearance of a small object stuck on to
                      another object (e.g. a snail on a log, a small bird perching
                      on a branch, a baby sitting on a parent's shoulder)
[toːt ^{2} poːt ^{2}]   Description of the appearance of a bigger object stuck on
                      to another object (e.g. a big frog on a log)
[ʔɔːt ^{2} pɔːt ^{2}]   Description of the appearance of a small, round, (tight)
                      bundle
[ʔoːt ^{2} poːt ^{2}]   Description of the appearance of a bigger, round, (tight)
                      bundle
[cɔːt ^{5} lɔːt ^{5}]   Description of the appearance of a long, small object with
                      tapering point (e.g. a stick, long pointed face)
[coːt ^{5} loːt ^{5}]   Description of the appearance of a bigger, long object with
                      tapering point (e.g. big, long, pointed face etc.)
[ŋɔːm ^{3} ŋɔːm ^{3}]   Description of the way a small insect walks
[ŋoːm ^{3} ŋoːm ^{3}]   Description of the way a big insect walks
[ʔɔŋ ^{4} lɔŋ ^{4}]   Description of the appearance of a small, (round) object
                      floating in the water
[ʔoŋ ^{4} loŋ ^{4}]   Description of the appearance of a big, (round) object
                      floating in the water
[ʔɔŋ ^{2} tʰɔŋ ^{2}]   Description of a small pot-hole on the road
[ʔeŋ ^{2} tʰeŋ ^{2}]   Description of a small and shallow pot-hole on the road
[ʔɔŋ ^{5} pɔŋ ^{5}]   Description of an object with a small swollen middle (leg
                      with small round calf muscle)
[ʔoŋ ^{5} poŋ ^{5}]   Description of an object with a big swollen middle
[kɔŋ ^{4} cɔŋ ^{4}]   Appearance of a small child standing with a crooked back
[koŋ ^{4} coŋ ^{4}]   Appearance of an adult standing with a crooked back
[mɔŋ ^{5} mɔŋ ^{5}]   Bright and twinkling of a small object (e.g. a star, a coin)
[moŋ ^{5} moŋ ^{5}]   Bright and twinkling of a big object (e.g. a bald head, a big
                      star)
[mɔŋ ^{4} mɔŋ ^{4}]   Sound of a small gong (used in Buddhist temple)
[moŋ ^{4} moŋ ^{4}]   Sound of a big gong

        Sometimes two expressives can be used in a row, the first differing from
the second in one feature only, usually frontness of the vowel. The effect of this
"chiming" is to include the sensation of plurality and scatteredness. For example:

[ʔɔŋ ^{2} tʰɔŋ ^{2} ʔeŋ ^{2} tʰeŋ ^{2}]   Many small pot holes on the road
[pɔː ^{5} cɔː ^{5} peː ^{5}ceː ^{5}]   Many circular, daisy-like patterns

[ʔɔːn⁵ tɔːn⁵ ʔɛːn⁵ teːn⁵]   Many small, (round) bundles hanging
[ʔɔːm⁵ pɔːm⁵ ʔɛːm⁵ peːm⁵]   Many small bundles
[kɔːt² cɔːt² keːt² ceːt²]   Many small piles (e.g. chicken's droppings)

    Apart from such constructions, there are also paradigmatic relations
between expressives: it is often possible to find pairs or sets of 3 or 4 expressives
which differ only in one phonological feature and one semantic detail. Very often
the difference resides in vowel height on the phonological side, and in size on the
semantic side. For example:

[tɔːt² pɔːt²]   Description of the appearance of a small
                                  object stuck on to another object (e.g. a snail
                                  on a log, a small bird perching on a branch,
                                  a baby sitting on a parent's shoulder)
[toːt² poːt²]   Description of the appearance of a bigger
                                  object stuck on to another object (e.g. a big frog on
                                  a log)
[ʔɔː⁵ pɔː⁵]   Description of a small round object (e.g. a bundle)
[ʔoː ⁵poː⁵]   Description of a big, round object (e.g. a big
                                  bundle)
[pɔː⁵ cɔː⁵]   Description of small, circular, daisy-like pattern
[peː⁵ ceː⁵]   Description of a big, circular, daisy-like pattern
[pəː⁵ cəː⁵]   Description of smaller, circular daisy-like pattern
[kʰim³ mim³]   Description of the appearance of a small, indistinct
                                  object in the distance
[kʰɔm³ mɔm³]   Description of the appearance of a medium size,
                                  indistinct object in the distance
[kʰum³ mum³]   Description of the appearance of a big object in a
                                  distance
[miŋ⁵ kiŋ⁵]   Appearance of small, widely-opened eyes
[mɔŋ⁵ kɔŋ⁵]   Appearance of medium size, widely-opened eyes
[moŋ⁵ koŋ⁵]   Appearance of big, widely-opened eyes
[ciːŋ⁴ piːŋ⁴]   Appearance of small hole
[cɔːŋ⁴ pɔːŋ⁴]   Appearance of (round) medium size hole
[coːŋ⁴ poːŋ⁴]   Appearance of (round) big hole
[caːŋ⁴ paːŋ⁴]   Appearance of wide, open space (no dimension)

4. Phonology and semantics of Lao expressives

    From the examples above, it is obvious that the semantic domain of
expressives is that of visual, auditory and perhaps also other sensations. But what
is more important is that sound symbolism is evidently a crucial part of this
phenomenon. Specifically, it is obvious that the quality of the vowels has a
semantic function. This kind of phenomenon can be best explained by iconicity.

Iconicity is a semiotic mechanism which uses similarities between the signifier and the signified (Posner, 1986) or simply put, between form and meaning. In other words, an iconic sign is any sign which is similar in some respects to what it denotes. In image iconicity, the form is physically similar in some way to the meaning, there are qualities of the form which resemble qualities of the meaning; for example a picture of a person is an image because it physically resembles in some way the person being photographed. Diagrams, on the other hand, are those icons "which represent the relations of the parts of one thing by analogous relations in their own parts" (Pierce 1902/1955:105); and "many diagrams resemble their objects not at all in looks; it is only in respect to the relations of their parts that their likeness consists" (p.107). Thus, in diagrams the similarity between pattern of sound(s) and the pattern of meaning can be observed.

4.1 Image iconicity

In image iconicity, a single item of sound resembles an item of meaning. For example in the set of Lao expressives [ciːŋ⁴piːŋ⁴] [cɔːŋ⁴pɔːŋ⁴] [coːŋ⁴poːŋ⁴] [caːŋ⁴paːŋ⁴], the [iː] vowel quality represents smallest size, [ɔː] represents medium size, [oː] represents bigger size, and [aː] represents the biggest size.

At first, the fact that the higher-back vowel [oː] symbolizes a greater size than the lower-back vowel [ɔː] seems to contradict the 'universal' assumption that high vowels generally symbolize "smallness" and low vowels symbolize "largeness". Even though this is true for the high-front vowel [iː] in Lao, this assumption doesn't hold in the case of high-back vowel [oː]. Thus, it follows that the phonetic explanation provided for languages like English, namely tongue height and the size of the air passage between the tongue and the palate (thus F1 dimension), cannot be used to explain the semantic contrast between the vowels [oː] and [ɔː] in Lao expressives.

One possible explanation that can be offered for the [oː] vs. [ɔː] contrast in Lao is that instead of focusing on the size of the air passage to convey the sensation of size, speakers of Lao focus on the sagittal length of the anterior resonance chamber.[4] Since the pronunciation of [oː] involves rounding of the lips, its anterior resonance chamber will always be longer than that of [ɔː]. This explanation can also be used to explain why the high-front vowel [iː] symbolizes the smallest size. During the pronunciation of [iː], there is a resonance chamber in front of the highest point of the tongue, but it is very small, much smaller than that for [ɔː] and [oː]. Thus the size symbolism [iː] > [ɔː] > [oː] (small to big), which seems unexplainable in terms of vowel height, can now be accounted for in a unified fashion.   As for the [aː] vowel, since no part of the tongue is raised during its pronunciation, the whole oral cavity is its resonance chamber, thus [aː] symbolizes the biggest size or more accurately no dimension.

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[4] The nature of the mapping between the speech stream (acoustics or articulation) and perceived meaning has not yet been thoroughly investigated.

The size of the anterior resonance chamber has a direct and important acoustic correlate: the longer the cavity, the lower the frequency of the second formant[2]. Thus [oː] will have a lower second formant than both [ɔː] and [iː]. In terms of second formants, the sequence: [oː], [ɔː], [iː] is ordered from lowest frequency to highest frequency in the same sequence as it is in Lao expressives with regards to size (see Table 1 below). Due to this fact, it is possible to actually see on spectrograms the dimension used for size-symbolism in Lao expressives.

Table 1. Formant frequencies (F1, F2 in Hz) of 8 long vowels of KN Lao words in isolation as spoken by a female speaker.

Vowel	F1 (Hz)	F2 (Hz)
[iː]	370	2749
[eː]	428	2610
[ɛː]	616	2427
[ɨː]	406	1840
[uː]	387	863
[ɔː]	795	1245
[oː]	440	977
[aː]	996	1775

4.2 Diagrammatic iconicity

In diagrams, the likeness between sound and meaning consists "only in respect to the relations of their parts". (Jakobson 1965:27). In Lao, chiming or reduplicated expressives like [ʔɔŋ²tʰɔŋ²] [ʔɛŋ²tʰɛŋ²] "many small pot holes on the road" have most of their segments reduplicated, except the vowels of the first and the second expressives. The vowel [ɔ] of the first word is opposite in frontness to the vowel [ɛ] of the second. Thus the whole expressive construction contains partial reduplication and partial modification. It is this abstract pattern which is used to convey iconically the meaning of "plurality" and "scatteredness". Since it is a pattern, not just a single item, we are dealing here with a diagram.

It is important to point out, however, that the alternation between [ɔ] and [ɛ] in Lao expressives does not signify only scatteredness and plurality, but also the shape of the object being described. Thus [ʔɔŋ²tʰɔŋ²] [ʔɛŋ²tʰɛŋ²] describes not only the scattered appearance of small pot holes in the road, but also their shapes: some are round and relatively deep (signified by [ɔ]) while some are relatively shallow and not necessarily round (signified by [ɛ]). The second formant (F2) parameter in this case signifies "depth": the lower the F2, the deeper the object. Thus [o] is deeper than [ɔ] and [ɔ] is deeper than [ɛ] respectively.

Table 2. Formant frequencies (F1, F2 in Hz) of [ɛ], [o] and [ɔ] of KN Lao words in isolation as spoken by a female speaker.

Vowel	F1 (Hz)	F2 (Hz)
[ɛ]	706	2222
[o]	387	906
[ɔ]	803	1186

5. Syntax of expressives

One indication that there is something unusual in expressives is the syntactic frames in which they are used. Actually, it would be more appropriate to speak of the absence of such frames, because Lao expressives do not seem to fit into a closely knit system of concurrence restrictions with other parts of speech the way nouns or verbs normally do.

One syntactic frame[5] where all Lao expressives can be found is the construction: "het[4] expressives juː[4]",

" liaw[1] pay[2] loːt[2] het[4] kʰoː[2] loː[2] juː[4]"
"turn around then **did** expressives **remain**",
meaning roughly "As I turned around, it was doing "Exp".

The quotation marks used here are deliberate because the construction serves to place the expressive on a level of abstraction which is different from that of the other words in the utterance. This Lao expression has the same semantic effect as certain syntactic devices used with expressives in other languages, for example in Tamil a suffix /-enru/, literally meaning "...thus saying" is always used after Tamil expressives; this same ending is otherwise used as a marker of direct quotation or after verbs of mental activity such as "believe that", "remember that", "feel that" and so on (Diffloth, class notes).

English has a similar use of the verb "go" to indicate a switch in discourse levels:

"She threw away the lighted match and the whole garage went "swoosh".

Here, the verb "went" serves to switch the roles of participants: the garage, starts out being an inanimate third person in a changing state; one would expect it to be the syntactic Subject of a verb like "burst into flames"; but suddenly it becomes a first person participant in the discourse, and what it says, reportedly, is "swoosh".

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[5] A few other syntactic frames such as "pen[2] Expressives" 'be Expressives', "pʰɔ[3] Expressives" 'enough Expressives' also exist, but will not be discussed here.

"He kept on and on talking about how great Cathy was, so, instead of snapping back at him she simply went "yukk" / ...went "give me a break". This example does not require that the words "yukk" or "give me a break" be actually uttered by "her" but simply that the corresponding feelings be experienced, possibly in completely mute fashion and expressed for example only by facial expression. In that case, the verb "went" switches the participant role of "she", from third person animate to that of first person in an imagined private speech of which she is also the hearer.

If the Lao construction het^4 ... $ju.^4$ serves to indicate that the use of an expressive implies a shift away from the participant roles previously established in the discourse, what is the new participant-role system? The subject of the verb het^4 'to do' is the observed situation and the object, what it "does", is the expressive.

We can interpret this characteristic construction as a way of saying that the observed situation conveyed a certain bundle of sensations to the observer, as if it was endowed with animate volition and with the power to "say" something. All the speaker does then is to "quote" this message for the benefit of the hearer. The use of an expressive would contain a distinct speech act, previously unreported in the linguistic literature, which is a form of quotation, not from the speech of other humans, but from a message of "inanimate" nature. (It is perhaps not an accident that many of the languages which use expressives today have a strong tradition of animism).

If we describe expressives as containing a speech act of "quotation from nature" this will help us in explaining why expressives cannot be intrinsically negated. Quotations can of course be negated, but they cannot be intrinsically negated. Consider the English sentence:

Marjorie didn't say "will you leave me alone!"

This has at least two meanings. Either Marjorie said nothing at all, with negation applying to the predicate "say"; the utterance could then continue:

" ...she just kept on quietly sucking her lolly-pop". Or Marjorie did say something but it was not "will you leave me alone!", with negation applying to the object of the verb "say", denying the accuracy of the quote; the utterance could then continue:

"... she said "will you give me a loan?", chewing on some sort of candy".

However, negation cannot apply to the quoted passage itself. A quotation is a report of an actual event; while the report may be accurate or inaccurate, the events themselves offer no grip to negation, truth or falsity. In this sense we can say that quotations cannot be intrinsically negated. Native speakers' comments

about the negation of expressives follow very much the same line of thinking: it is possible to use a negative with an expressive but only to question the choice of this particular expressive, never to negate the expressive itself. While the choice of words, the report, may be arguable, the message from nature is just an event, and does not give rise to the possibility of truth value.

The notion of a "quotation from nature" is not without problems. Ordinary direct quotation of speech usually consists in repeating the words used by another person. Many elements of the original linguistic message: pitch, loudness, voice quality and even small linguistic pieces judged irrelevant are modified, and very often the original intonation is replaced, in English for example, by a monotone falling diction which serves to emphasize the fact that only the words are being repeated. Direct quotations, then, are never identical copies of the original and are not even meant to try closely mimicking the original speaker, though this can be attempted for specific purposes. Direct quotations always display a certain amount of selection and distortion.

If the idea of expressives is to quote "messages from nature" such distortion necessarily plays a much greater role. After all, the message of natural situations comes to the speaker not in the form of human words but in the form of sensations. If this message is to be quoted by the speaker using the medium of speech, it is necessary to use a code which conveys as much of the original message as quotation requires, but selection and distortion are unavoidable. This is where iconicity comes in.

Expressives are therefore semantically quite different from the ordinary, prosaic words of the language. The difference is not in the details of their meaning but in their fundamental semantic type. Languages which lack a class of expressives thus differ semantically from those that do in ways which are not anecdotal but fundamental.

In conclusion, we can say that the use of expressives contains the following message: I, the speaker, am receiving a certain bundle of sensations from the situation at hand and I am trying to quote this message as directly as possible to the hearer. For this I am using a certain shared knowledge of similarities between the sensations of speech and those of nature; this shared knowledge forms an aesthetic component which is a part of the particular language we are speaking, and is put to systematic use in the word class of expressives. By using an expressive I am coding the original message into speech sensations, and thus trying to convey some properties of the original sensations as directly to the hearer as speech makes it possible. Awareness of this iconic system of sensations is part of what it means to know the Lao language. Using this system, large numbers of expressives have been created and are constantly being created anew by speakers of the language.

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Received: January 1996   Department of Modern Languages
                                                                                   Morrill Hall
                                                                            Cornell University
                                                              Ithaca, New York 14853-4701
                                                                  e-mail: rw32@cornell.edu