

PERSPECTIVE ON AFRICAN IDEOPHONES

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African languages are characterized typologically by a class of words known in the English literature as "ideophones". While they were investigated as long ago as 1886 by J. McLaren,¹ they are still very much ignored in grammatical descriptions and in general linguistic discussions. The total number of pages, both in learned journals and grammatical monographs, which are devoted to their study is insignificant in comparison to their importance in African languages.² This importance is measured not only by their number in any one lexicon, but also by their artful use in colourful narratives.

While no count of African ideophones can yet be considered approximately adequate, one can get an impression of their importance from the fact that in Doke's dictionary of Zulu there are four or five to a page. My own lexical file of Gbeya (**Gbeya**) includes 1500.

Eloquence is undoubtedly best measured only by native speakers of a language. Nonetheless, I dare say that a masterful use of an African's language is probably always correlated with a generous use of ideophones. If this is true, there are practical and theoretical implications: practical, because a mastery of an African language by a foreign speaker can never be measured without due consideration being given to his use of ideophones; theoretical, because students of African languages may have to recognize that no study of their stylistics and verbal art forms is complete without proper appreciation of the function of these words.

In the preceding paragraphs I have sug-

gested a few subjects with which linguists might properly concern themselves. There are others. What is more important, however, is that there is room for scholars from other disciplines to make their contributions to a study from which they would also derive great profit. It is the purpose of this paper to expose some facets of this subject which seem to me to deserve serious attention by the scholarly world.

One of the questions which every language analyst must answer is "Exactly what are the ideophones?" One needs to add, of course, that this question must be answered for only one language at a time in the same way that all the other morpheme or word classes are investigated.

One gets the impression in reading the grammars that the classification of ideophones has not always been an easy one. Nor, we might also add, has it been a happy one. Indeed, it seems certain that one of the reasons they have hitherto been so little studied is that they have been classed with exclamations and interjections. Without a rigorous application of formal criteria for the determination of linguistic units, writers find themselves in the embarrassing predicament of using subjective ones. One author, for example, says that "The ideophone indicates exclamatorily a state of affairs; the interjective is the exclamatory utterance of a subjective emotion."³ The quoted writer is probably following the great Bantuist, Professor C. M. Doke who, although considering the ideophone a "special part of speech" still related it to the interjections.⁴ The latter writer goes on to show, however, that ideo-

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¹ *An Introductory Kafir Grammar with Progressive Exercises* (where they are called indeclinable verbal particles).

² Two outstanding exceptions are the following: George Fortune, *Ideophones in Shona* (Oxford University Press, 1962), 43p.; Derek Nivaz, *Some Aspects of the Ideophone in Zulu* (Hartford Seminary Foundation M.A. Thesis) *Hartford Studies in Linguistics*, 1963, 199p. [Mimographed].

³ G. Fortune, *An Analytical Grammar of Shona* (London, 1955), p. 421.

⁴ C. M. Doke, *Outline Grammar of Bantu* (Johannesburg, University of the Witwatersrand, 1943), p. 56 [Mimographed].

phones must be distinguished both from the real interjections and the real adverbs while sharing features of both.⁵ If his criteria were soundly based on formal features, which include distributional characteristics, he would have better served his colleagues.

One of the principal theses of this paper is that ideophones lend themselves to formal description like all other classes of morphemes. I use, by way of example, the Gbeya language, spoken in the Central African Republic, and belonging to the Adamawa-Eastern family of Niger-Congo.⁶

Among the classes of Gbeya 'words' determined by their morphological and syntactic distribution, are interjections, adjectives, and adverbs. It is among the last class where ideophones occur. Like the negative marker *ná* they are characterized by the ability to enter in construction with verbs. While substantives also have this feature (when, for example, they serve as 'objects' of a verb), the adverbs for their part can neither occur as 'subjects' nor enter in construction with prepositions, etc. In other words, a verb phrase (e.g. that part of a sentence deprived of a 'subject') can consist of a verb and an adverb, e.g.

ri / bó ná

"There is no water"

wa / té kəḏərə kəḏərə

"They come (making a noise . . .)"

These characteristics are enough to set them off from other classes of morphemes, and hence answer (at least in part) the question "What are ideophones?"

This is not to say that we have yet disclosed everything there is to say about Gbeya ideophones, however. One other feature of their distribution is that unlike a few other adverbs (which as a consequence constitute a separate but co-ordinate subclass) they can occur as attributives of nouns, e.g.

goṅ goṅ-tuwa

"square house"

wa dé tuwa goṅ goṅ

"They are making the house square"

The preceding summary statement of the classification of ideophones in Gbeya illustrates to what extent formal analysis can be applied to their definition as a class. To give them a class name is not, however, the same as to answer the question mentioned above. If it is the responsibility of the analyst to describe linguistic structure, it is also his task to relate his discoveries to the rest of his science.

The remainder of this paper is concerned therefore with outlining five areas of study which could be taken up with great profit. A similar class of words in some other non-African languages is not brought into this discussion although phonologic and semantic parallels are outstanding. A comprehensive study of the subject would certainly include these other languages.

1. *The semantic field of ideophones.* If the semantic fields of all words in a language can be classified under the rubrics "object, event, abstract" and "relation",⁷ it is certain that ideophones are qualificative; it is their function to qualify some other part of an utterance. Like qualificatives in other languages they cover sound, colour, smell, manner, appearance, state, motion, texture, intensity, etc. What distinguishes them from other qualificatives known in the West, however, is the *degree* of their specificity. Some African languages are said to have 20, 30 or even 40 different ideophones to describe different kinds of "walking". I have put the word "walking" in quotation marks, because we have hardly begun to study the classification of human experience revealed by ideophones. A componential analysis of the semantics involved with the motion casually described above as "walking" might very well reveal several different categories of perceived events; e.g. (1) size or shape of the object in motion, (2) the speed of the movement, (3) the condition of the material being traversed, (4) the purpose of the motion, and (5) other characteristics of the motion. It will probably be difficult to devise a single

⁵ C. M. Doke, *The Southern Bantu Languages* (London, New York, 1954), p. 86.

⁶ Described in my doctoral dissertation, *The Gbeya Language*, submitted to the University of California, Berkeley.

⁷ Eugene A. Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating* (Leiden, 1964), pp. 59-69.

comprehensive grid for all the relevant features, but if the oppositions are made in binary terms, greater clarity will result. Thus, ideophones might be classed according to their concern with the size or shape of an object: big/little, tall/short, fat/thin, young/old, straight/crooked, etc.

These oppositions cannot be determined, however, without there first being an extensive investigation of certain restricted phenomena. My own study of Gbeya ideophones in the summer of 1962 (the results of which will be treated elsewhere) demonstrates quite clearly that such an investigation is not only extremely interesting but altogether necessary. I am convinced that these "vocal images or representations of visual, auditory and other sensory or mental experiences"⁸ can be classified according to a certain restricted number of semantic categories. In an experimental study with almost 200 Bambara ideophones, for example, I have had considerable success with 15 components: appearance, arrangement, emotion, measure, motion, odour, quality, shape, sound, state, taste, temperature, time, touch, and weight. In a present study of Kikuyu ideophones they are being tested more rigorously than was possible with Bambara.

What I have just stated is a hypothesis. If it can be proven true, we will have a tool for the understanding of African cultures hitherto unutilized by Africanists. Once devised for any one language, its application to the comparative study of African cultures and languages—typologically and perhaps historically—might ensue.

2. *The by-systemic characteristics of ideophones.* The phonological features of ideophones require careful study, for they pose problems with which the linguistic theorist must grapple. It has been customary in America for linguists to posit a single phonemic system for a language. Although the use of certain rare phones is recognized, it has been pointed out that they do not relate with the other sounds in an integrated system. In this way, a lateral click which occurs in an English

interjection is not considered phonemic.

Now the ideophones of several African languages have been described by competent analysts as being characterized by phonological phenomena which are phonemically aberrant.⁹ In the Nguni languages, for example, the ideophones have, on the one hand, phonemes which do not occur elsewhere in the language, and, on the other hand, they have distributions of other phonemes which are also abnormal. Here is, therefore, a class of morphemes where is revealed a phonemic 'by-system' in the language.

3. *Sound symbolism in ideophones.* One of the most naïve characterizations of the ideophones is to call them onomatopoeic, yet this is the name by which they are still known in some circles. It is extremely doubtful that in any African language even ten per cent of the ideophones derive from non-linguistic sound. Of my 1500 Gbeya ideophones a bare handful are truly onomatopoeic. Even if I admit that others exist, my present collection is probably a reliable indication of the actual proportion.

What is more interesting than onomatopoeia is the presence of the phenomena of sound symbolism and secondary association. By "sound symbolism" I refer to the correlation between certain meanings and certain phonemes. In Gbeya for example, there is a rather consistent pairing of all-high-tone and all-low-tone words studied. For example, in describing the rattle of two stones in a tin can, *wókóró wókóró* is used when the pebbles are small and *wokoro wokoro* when they are larger. What needs to be done for Gbeya at least is to determine the extent of this opposition. Does it, for example, obtain only for objects or sounds? We need not, of course, expect similar oppositions in different languages to have similar functions. I am told that in Ewe, for example, a high/low contrast is meliorative/pejorative in at least some words.

Of an entirely different nature is the possibility of correlating certain phonemes with

⁸ D. T. Cole, *An Introduction to Tswana Grammar* (Cape Town, 1955), p. 370.

⁹ D. T. Cole, *ibid.*; L. Lanham, *A Comparative Phonology of Nguni* (Johannesburg, University of the Witwatersrand, Ph.D. Thesis 1960), pp. 174-79.

certain meanings. Both in Ewe and Gbeya for example, the ideophones for "sweet" have the vowel /i/ and a lateral resonant consonant. Again, it is surprising how many different African languages have some back rounded vowel in the ideophones for "dark, dim, obscure, foggy", etc. These are only suggestions, needless to say; one must expect accidental resemblances to occur. Nonetheless, is it only coincidental that in all 15 of the Gbeya ideophones I collected to describe the surface of a brush, every tone is low? Is it not significant that several of the forms meaning "many" or "many different" have the phoneme /k/? For example, *vək vək*, *ɔ́ék ɔ́ék*, *ngbən ngbək*. It would be relatively easy to study the correlation between form and meaning. Punch-cards or computer machines would show us all the combinations with little difficulty.

4. *Secondary association versus morphemic segmentation.* One of the problems in morphemic description has been the treatment of such English phonemic sequences as /gl/ and /sl/ in words like "gleam, glimmer, glint" and "slush, slime, slop". These are the kinds of recurrent segments which an analyst tentatively considers morphemic because of their correlation with a specific meaning. In a final analysis of English these segments have been described as non-morphemic. Any meanings which native speakers might attribute to them are said to derive from an accidental association in a list of words having some area of meaning in common.

The same phenomenon occurs in African ideophones, but apparently on a much larger scale. In Gbeya again there are many ideophones consisting of two 'words', neither of which ever occurs independently; the second 'word' recurs in different ideophones, all of which have one meaning in common. For example, there are four ideophones whose second constituent consists of /k (vowel) s (vowel)/. They all have the meaning "unevenness, deviation from an expected norm". For example, *wərə kəsə* "rough (pounded millet)", *kpərə kəsə* "hobnailed (shoes)", *wolo koso* "uneven (edges of paper chewed by mouse)". There are 17 other such recurrent segments in the corpus, the vowels of

which are usually identical with the vowel of the first element.

fVrV: *gbada fara* "small", *ngbodo foro* "small (dog)"

kVrV: *ngutu kuru* "short (tuber)", *bada kara* "short and fat (person)"

sVdV (extension or constriction): *ɔ́ik siɔ́i* "(sit) unmoving (i.e. not getting up to greet people who are returning with meat from a hunt)", *ɔ́ók sɔ́dɔ́* "shallow (river)", *gbák sáɔ́á* "flat (plate)", *gbək sɛɔ́ɛ* "wide-bottomed (gourd)", *kək sɔ́dɔ́* "bent (head of war-club)", *tək sɔ́dɔ́* "drowsy", *káɔ́á sɔ́dɔ́* "long (of bird bill)", *dom sɔ́dɔ́* "tasteless (not enough salt)", *háɔ́ sáɔ́á* "tight (hat which does not fit)", *kek sɛɔ́ɛ* "strong, healthy (child)", *kék sɛɔ́ɛ* "thin (person after illness)"

ɔ́VrV (hard, inflexible): *dəke ɔ́ɛɛ* "squatting", *goso ɔ́oro* "stiff (new mat, tire)", *ngasa ɔ́ara* "hard", *ngara ɔ́ara* "hard (ground)", *saka ɔ́ara* "sandy sensation (in eyes)"

ɔ́VIV (supple, flabby, yielded): *zaka ɔ́ila* "(different kinds of sauces) mixed together", *rəkə ɔ́iya* "loose-jointed (corpse before rigor mortis)". Perhaps *ɔ́iya* can be explained by the common alternation of /l/ and /y/ in the language.

sVʔnV: *njk sɔ́ni* "wrinkled", *gbak saʔna* "unprepared to give a lift (flustered?)"

IVrV: *bək lərə* "wet (wood)", *hɛp lɛɛ* (translation not determined)

ngVIVɔ́: *gbəsə ngələn* "loose, untied (rope)", *gbeze ngereɔ́* "unprepared". The alternation of /l/ with /r/ is also common in the language.

sV (in disorder, deviating from accepted pattern): *gbok so* "(come) unexpectedly", *ʔmam su* "large, whole (manioc); large, rotten, unclean (tooth)", *ngbuk su* "(being angry and) puckering up one's mouth", *wak sa* "(what they say does not agree; it is still) in disagreement"

yVrV: *gbéngbé yéré* "(appeared in front of the lions) all of a sudden, unprotected", *ngəkə yərə* "uncleaned (unhoed and unlevelled front yard)"

sVɔ́: *gaɔ́ saɔ́* "(killed big game) with one

shot", **saŋ soŋ** "different (spear-shafts)",
gən sən "lumber) piled up"

kpVŋ: gəŋ kpəŋ "(crocodile swishes tail)
 back and forth", **rəŋ kpəŋ** "(river
 flows) smoothly"

kVrVŋ: dən kərəŋ "(body) swollen (in
 illness)", **din kirin** "non-flowing (water
 in cove)", **din ʔniŋ** "above", **gbəŋ
 kalaŋ** "wide (crate)", **kpəŋ káləŋ**
 "(open door) wide", **soŋ koron** "(sit on
 ground) squatting", **wəŋ kələŋ** "(wall
 studs are up but the cross pieces are)
 untied", **won koron** (same as **soŋ
 koron**)

ʔnVŋ: din ʔniŋ "heavy (spear)", **kən ʔnéŋ**
 (referring to the shape of the moon in
 its last quarter), **səŋ ʔnón** "(make
 house) small", **ŋmaŋ ʔnaŋ** "big and
 fat"

dVŋ: ŋməŋ dən "caved in (bottom of
 basket)", **ten dən** "stiff (neck)", **naŋ
 din** "tough (meat)"

ʔVIVŋ: ndin ʔiriŋ "disinterested, still
 (because of cold weather)", **gaŋ ʔilaŋ**
 "twisted, bent", **ndon ʔolon** "round
 (tree trunk)"

dVŋ: ndon din "thick (cloth)", **ŋgbəŋ dən**
 "fat and tall", **rón dón** "short and
 thin", **yəŋ dən** "(stay in one place)
 without going on ahead", **zon don**
 "stiff (arm)"

Whether or not this phenomenon constitutes "grammatical formative elements" (the absence of which Doke indicated as one of the characteristics of the ideophones)¹⁰ should best be determined in other discussions. It is certainly a significant structural feature of this class of morphemes. To my knowledge this has never before been pointed out in the literature, yet I find in other African languages a similar phenomenon.

5. *Language relationships.* African ideophones have probably never been used to distinguish dialects, the reason given being their lack of phonetic or semantic correspondence.¹¹ There are perhaps better ways of determining dialects or language bound-

daries than by using these words. Nonetheless, ideophones must not be rejected before a fair test is made of their variation. If my own comparative work on the ideophones of the Gbaya-Mamza languages is anywhere near the usual pattern, there is much more uniformity than one has been led to expect.

The use of ideophones has been ignored in the study also of the creolized European languages which at one time were spoken by Africans. I refer to the various English, French and Portuguese Creoles spoken in Africa and abroad. Many individuals have attempted to enumerate the vestiges of African influence in these languages, but too few have made a serious comparison of African and Creole ideophones. They are in fact 'African' in many respects. One of the least known of these features is the one which has already been touched upon, i.e. their deviation from the phonological norm of the language. In Jamaican Creole, I am informed, the usual declarative sentence intonation consists of a rising pitch at the end of the sentence. When such a sentence ends, however, with an ideophone, the pitch remains low.¹² Here very clearly variations in phonological patterning are correlated with the ideophones.

Conclusion. In this paper I have attempted to focus attention on a very important part of African languages, not only because ideophones by count constitute, next to nouns and verbs, a major part of the total lexicon of African languages, but also because, for several different reasons, they provide the linguist, psychologist, and ethnologist with data for the study of interesting and important matters. By indicating several lacunae in their treatment, I have attempted to show that this class of words did not deserve to be assigned to a linguistic limbo to which ordinary interjections were, it seems, long ago confined. A by-product of this attempt is perhaps the demonstration that African speech is less 'interjectional' than the naïve have too long thought.

¹⁰ *Outline Grammar of Bantu*, p. 56.

¹¹ *The Southern Bantu Languages*, p. 86.

¹² Personal communication from Dr David DeCamp.