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Ideophones: honing in on a descriptive and typological concept

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Abstract

This paper introduces the special issue of *Linguistic Typology at the Crossroads*, entitled “Ideophones: honing in on a descriptive and typological concept”, edited by Aimée Lahaussais, Julie Marsault and Yvonne Treis. The contributions, which are the result of work by a research group on ideophones and interjections, funded by the Labex EFL in Paris, are mainly descriptive papers with a typological perspective, informed by the more than 20 years of ideophone research following the landmark publication edited by Voeltz & Kilian-Hatz in 2001. After introducing the field and briefly presenting each contribution, we discuss issues in ideophone research that the articles gathered here contribute to, namely whether or not ideophones make up a clear-cut word class in different languages, and how different contributors interpret their relationship with onomatopoeia and interjections. We also present an overview of the primary syntactic uses of ideophones in the different languages and highlight the morphological processes attested for ideophonization and deideophonization, which are still under-investigated.

Keywords: ideophones; word classes; descriptive linguistics; typology; onomatopoeia; historiography.

1. Introduction

Ideophones have been a topic of research for more than a century, since even before the term “ideophone” was popularized by Doke (1935). Throughout the 20th century, ideophones have been the object of a growing number of descriptive works in individual languages, in linguistic families or in linguistic areas. While the term “ideophone” emerged in the Africanist tradition and is now the most widely used term, the Japonic linguistic tradition tends to use the term “mimetics” (e.g. Hirose 1981), while South Asian linguistics favors “expressives” (e.g. Diffloth 1976; Badenoch & Choksi 2021). For a comprehensive account of the history of research on ideophones, as well as a history of the term “ideophone”, see Dingemanse (2011a: section 2.1 and chapter 3).

Ideophones have been a topic of particular theoretical and typological interest since the turn of the 21st century (e.g. Hinton et al. 1994; Voeltz & Kilian-Hatz 2001; Akita 2009; Dingemanse 2012; Dingemanse 2017; Dingemanse 2019; McLean 2021; Andrason & Heine 2023; among many others), with recent edited volumes and monographs including Barrett et al. (2014), Armoskaite & Koskinen (2017), Haiman (2018), Akita & Pardeshi (2019), Badenoch & Choksi (2021). They have been shaped by interactions with research on sound symbolism and iconicity (e.g. Hinton et al. 1994; Nuckolls 1999; Dingemanse 2011b; Dingemanse & Akita 2016; Thompson & Do 2019; Winter et al. forthcoming).

Attempts at defining “ideophones” as a comparative concept for typological studies go back to the 2010s at least (esp. Dingemanse 2012; Dingemanse 2019; Akita & Pardeshi 2019). The cross-linguistic definition of “ideophones” proposed by Dingemanse (2012, 2019) is a welcome tool for typological work on ideophones, as proven by its nearly ubiquitous presence in articles on the topic (most of our contributions either use it or mention it), as well as for identifying diachronic variations, as he convincingly argues. The initial definition in 2012 was amended in 2019 to “[a] member of an open lexical class of marked words that depict sensory imagery” (Dingemanse 2019: 16). Dingemanse explicitly proposes this five-part definition as the basis for a comparative concept. Furthermore, the implicational hierarchy for the sensory domains depicted by ideophones, as proposed in Dingemanse (2012), has proven itself as a stimulating heuristic tool, as linguists have examined their own data with an eye towards confirming (or disproving) its predictions, which sometimes led to additions to or to minor revisions of the hierarchy

(e.g. McLean 2021, and comments in Rose this volume; for a very recent transformation of Dingemanse's hierarchy into a semantic map, see Van Hoey 2023).

One question which is not often addressed in the literature is the extent to which the category of “ideophones” is useful for the description of particular languages, language families, or areas. The papers collected in this special issue present work carried out by a research group funded by the Labex EFL, Paris (<https://en.labex-efl.fr/>) on “Ideophones and Interjections in a typological, areal and diachronic perspective”, bringing together researchers in the Paris area and some additional collaborators. In contrast to edited volumes which focus on specific features of ideophones or related theoretical issues (Lahti et al. 2014; Armoskaite & Koskinen 2017; Akita & Pardeshi 2019; Badenoch & Choksi 2021), the contributions in the present volume provide typologically-oriented descriptions of ideophones or ideophone-like words in under-described languages which are geographically and phylogenetically varied. In this sense, the volume has a similar approach to Voeltz & Kilian-Hatz (2001), but is informed by insights in the typological literature on ideophones of the last 20 years. The result is that the contributions to this volume describe a wider range of features of ideophones than had been previously taken into consideration. Additionally, the contributions for the most part include discussions on the definition and identification of ideophones, and on their status as a word class in individual languages. For instance, while the identification of a category of ideophones is straightforward in some languages, in others it presents a methodological challenge. In this way, the contributions gathered here participate in defining the boundaries between the “ideophone” as a word-class relevant to grammatical description and the set of iconic words that can be taken as reflecting ideophone-like phenomena but not constituting a definable class in a given language (Dingemanse 2019).

This volume explores ideophones in languages and linguistic areas that have been less well-represented in ideophone research, such as the Caucasus (Authier), North America (Marsault) and Creole languages (Quint), in most cases presenting new and unpublished field data. New aspects of ideophone research presented in this volume include the prosody of ideophones (Rose); the history of the use of the term “ideophone” and related terms in a linguistic area (Lahaussais); the presence of consonant or vowel gradation in ideophones or ideophone-like classes of words (Marsault, Rose, Bril), and deideophonic and ideophonicizing derivational processes (Meyer, Treis, Guérois). See also the discussion in section 3.

2. List of contributions

Aimée Lahaussais looks at ideophones in descriptions of **Kiranti languages** (Trans-Himalayan/Sino-Tibetan, Nepal), identifying them on the basis of morpho-phonological templates she has defined for languages on which she has carried out extensive fieldwork. Using these templates, she finds ideophonic lexemes in grammatical descriptions of other languages, and documents the associated terminology and descriptive apparatus. The study is motivated by the small footprint of ideophones in existing descriptions, and the possibility of carrying out areal work on these lexemes and exploring questions of language contact (and notably whether it is the patterns or the matter which are borrowed) if they were more easily identified as such in descriptions.

Julie Marsault analyzes sound roots in **Umóⁿhoⁿ**, a Siouan language of North America, with a philological study based on a closed corpus. Adopting a top-down approach, she tries to determine whether Umóⁿhoⁿ has a word class of ideophones that corresponds to Dingemans's comparative concept. She takes as a point of departure a nineteenth century publication listing many so-called “onomatopes” and identifies a group of sound roots with a coherent set of morphological, syntactic and semantic features. She concludes that the sound roots have ideophone-like features, but that there is no basis for identifying a distinct morphosyntactic class of ideophones.

Françoise Rose proposes an in-depth description of **Teko** (Tupi, French Guiana) ideophones entirely based on her own field data. In this language, ideophones form a clear-cut, easily identifiable category, and Rose analyzes their features systematically at various levels and compares them to the classes of nouns and verbs. This paper stands out for including a detailed analysis of prosodic features and discourse uses, as well as for providing quantitative data.

In **Kambaata** (Cushitic, Ethiopia) ideophones are an open word class of morphologically invariant lexemes that require the support verbs *y-* ‘say’ in intransitive clauses and *a’-* ‘do’ in transitive clauses to be inflected and syntactically integrated into an utterance. Based on lexicographical data and her own fieldnotes, **Yvonne Treis** discusses features of the phonology, phonotactics and stress marking of ideophones, investigates which derivational processes take ideophonic inputs, and shows in which syntactic functions ideophones are used.

Amharic (Ethiosemitic, Ethiopia) has complex predicates which consist of an invariant coverb followed by an inflecting light verb. **Ronny Meyer**'s article provides a detailed description of the elements that can function as coverbs in complex predicates and provides a language-internal morphosyntactic definition of ideophones as a word class. It is argued that only ideophonic coverbs can form noncausal/causal complex predicate pairs with the light verbs *alä* 'say' and *adärrägä* 'do'. In addition to a large number of basic ideophonic lexemes, Amharic can also derive ideophones from verbal roots through dedicated templates (non-linear morphology) expressing intensification or attenuation of the event denoted by the root.

Based on a recently collected fieldwork corpus, **Rozenn Guérois**'s paper offers an overview of ideophones in **Sena**, a Bantu language spoken in central Mozambique. By closely examining the different features (phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics) of Sena ideophones, her paper aims to identify the language-internal aspects of ideophones. The claim is that Sena ideophones are best treated as a distinctive word class whose members can be used in a variety of syntactic constructions. A crucial syntactic property is their ability to be used as independent and holophrastic predicates.

Isabelle Brill presents a study of ideophones in **Northern Amis** (East Formosan, Taiwan). Starting from Proto-Austronesian (PAn) "onomatopoeic" roots reconstructed by Blust (1988), she documents Amis words associated with sensory experiences, covering depictive to descriptive functions, and existing along a continuum with onomatopoeia on one end (as fully depictive lexemes) and fully grammatically integrated ideophones on the other (as fully descriptive lexemes). Questions regarding the status of ideophones are particularly interesting in light of the acategorical nature of lexemes in Northern Amis.

Gilles Authier describes the ideophones of **Archi** (East Caucasian, Dagestan/Russia), which are defined by their occurrence in light verb constructions with the verb *bos* 'say'. Based on data drawn from an online dictionary (Chumakina et al. 2007), Authier proposes a semantic classification of ideophones, which include sound and speech, non-auditory sensations, ingestion, movement and effortful activities, and places Archi ideophones within the larger context of language contact in the area.

Nicolas Quint investigates ideophones in **Upper Guinea Creoles** (West Africa), a family of Afro-Portuguese creoles, based on a combination of field data and published documentation. He investigates the inventory of ideophones in all varieties and shows

a divide between the continental branch and the insular (Cape Verdean) branch, which are mainly in contact with Niger-Congo languages and with Portuguese, respectively. The presence or absence of ideophones in these contact languages has had an impact on the size of the inventory and on the phonological and morphological features of ideophones in each branch of Upper Guinea Creoles.

3. Discussion

As mentioned above, one of our initial questions was about the word class status of ideophones and its language-internal usefulness as a descriptive concept. For the languages discussed in almost all the contributions, ideophones clearly constitute a distinct lexical category, based on morphological and/or syntactic criteria. In such cases, the authors can easily and successfully adopt a bottom-up approach to identify ideophones in the language, and then map them onto the comparative concept proposed by Dingemans (see esp. Treis, Rose, Meyer, Guérois). Other contributions show that although the comparative concept is not a perfect match for their data, the definition of ideophone is nonetheless useful and allows them to capture relationships between word types that might otherwise be overlooked (this is the case for Kiranti languages). A notable exception is the contribution by Marsault, who adopts a top-down approach to determine how well the comparative concept of ideophones fits the available Umóⁿhoⁿ data, a methodology constrained by sound-imitating verbal roots which cannot be distinguished from other verbal roots in a systematic way.

Connected to the issue of word class status are questions about the boundary with other word types which tend to be grouped together under hypernyms such as “interactives” (Heine 2023) or “expressives” (Foolen 2015; “expressive” is particularly favored in discussing languages of South and Southeast Asia, see Badenoch & Choksi 2021; Williams 2021; Diffloth 1976). In the contributions to this volume, this especially concerns onomatopoeia and interjections.

Ideophones vs. onomatopoeia. Onomatopoeia are sometimes treated as a subtype of ideophones, as by Treis in this volume (see also Treis & Deginet 2024). This approach is also adopted in Haiman (2018: 82), Hamano (1998) for Japanese, and several contributions in Körtvélyessy & Štekauer (2024: 4). By contrast, Quint and Meyer specify that although sound-denoting ideophones are onomatopoeia, not all onomatopoeia are ideophones. Brill (section 2.2) states that onomatopoeia and ideophones are best described as two distinct categories in Northern Amis, although

a few lexemes belong to both categories (i.e., are sometimes used as onomatopoeia and sometimes as ideophones). This suggests that ideophones and onomatopoeia form two distinct but overlapping classes in these languages, in line with Dingemanse (2019: 28). Marsault, for her part, shows that the sound-imitative roots in Umóⁿhoⁿ are completely distinct from onomatopoeia. The different analyses reveal a longstanding difficulty in defining onomatopoeia in typological/comparative terms, due to different definitions and uses of the term, and also due to important cross-linguistic variations concerning their relationship to other word classes. See Körtvélyessy & Štekauer (2024) for a recent handbook on onomatopoeia.

Ideophones vs. interjections. In contrast with onomatopoeia, all contributors who mention interjections treat them as a distinct word class from ideophones. This distinction is representative of the literature on the subject. Although ideophones and interjections are often cited together as typical representatives of the expressive or depictive function of language (e.g. Kunene 2001: 189), or for both having irregular phonic patterns (e.g. Ameka 2001: 30; Karani & Andrason 2022: 451), many descriptions make clear that they belong to distinct categories (e.g. Creissels 2001: 75-76; Dingemanse 2011a: 155-157; Karani & Andrason 2022: 455). Some of our contributions, however, mention interjections as adopting ideophonic properties in a specific syntactic environment. In Amharic and Kambaata (Meyer, Treis), ideophones only occur with the light verbs ‘say’ or ‘do’, in what Güldemann (2008) calls quotative constructions, and some interjections undergo semantic shifts when used with ‘say’, leaving them undifferentiated from ideophones. Quotative constructions thus constitute pivot constructions where the same lexeme can be used as an interjection or an ideophone (with distinct semantic results, only the first one being interpretable as reported speech). Authier briefly mentions a couple of conative interjections that can be used in quotative construction with a meaning distinct from direct reported speech (see also Reiter 2011: 478 ff. for interjections used with non-quotative light verbs). To the best of our knowledge, pivot constructions between ideophones and interjections have not been the object of dedicated studies yet.

Our contributions exemplify different systems of ideophones with regard to the ways they are integrated (or not) into the grammar. At the functional and semantic levels, most of the languages described have ideophones with either primarily predicative uses or primarily adverbial uses. This kind of distinction is already widely commented on in the literature, including language-internally. For instance, Güldemann (2008: 282–283) notes that most ideophones, depending on the language,

either occur in regular collocation with another content word to intensify its meaning, or they are semantically and structurally independent. In the second use, he distinguishes between ideophones that “establish [...] an event representation on their own” (2008: 282) and “inserting constructions” (2008: 282) with a ‘say’-verb. For his part, and in parallel to Güldemann, Heine (2023: 153) identifies modifying, free and quotative constructions of ideophones.

We can cite for **primary predicative uses** Teko (Rose), Kambaata (Treis), Amharic (Meyer), Archi (Authier) and Northern Amis (Bril). All of these languages have quotative constructions. Quotative constructions form the only possible syntactic frame for ideophones in Kambaata, Amharic and Archi (and the authors use this as the main criterion for identifying ideophones), while Teko ideophones can also be used as (argument-taking) predicates on their own, and Northern Amis ideophones can be used as (argument-taking) predicates when they take voice markers. By contrast, ideophones in Upper Guinea Creoles (Quint) and the Kiranti languages (Lahaussais) have **adverbial uses**, where they cover different semantic fields but always modify a verb phrase or an adjective. Note that both families have a subcategory of ideophones with an intensifying meaning and that generally combine with only one lexeme. Intensifying ideophones are well-known in the literature (e.g. Newman 1968: 109; Bowler & Gluckman 2018). In Sena (Guérois), ideophones can be used predicatively or adverbially. In their predicative use, they can be used as predicates on their own, or in a complex predicate with a light verb, in which case they are semantically equivalent to nouns or adjectives (in attributive predicate functions). The sound-denoting roots in Umóⁿhoⁿ (Marsault) are verbal roots, but they are often used in a verb-modifying function in verb series, as Marsault demonstrates.

Finally, both Teko and Sena also feature ideophones in **holophrastic uses**, which are close to predicative uses (we include in this category Rose’s “collocational use” of Teko ideophones, where the ideophone forms its own clause but co-expresses an event expressed by a verb in the following clause). In summary, except for the independent uses of ideophones attested in Teko and Sena, all the examples in our contributions show relatively well integrated ideophones, syntactically speaking. (For a recent publication addressing the ambivalent grammatical behavior of ideophones as syntactically detached interactive elements and as fully morphosyntactically integrated constituents, see Andrason & Heine 2023, who view these (and other) uses as different stages in a gradual grammaticalization process).

A still underrepresented issue in the literature is the issue of derivation into or out of the category of ideophones – although note works on morphological ideophonization processes such as Childs (1989) on Kisi and Le Guen (2014) on Yucatec Maya; Jacques (2013) describes both word class-preserving ideophonic morphology as well as the formation of deideophonic verbs and nouns. Most contributions to this special issue mention cases of **deideophonization through derivation** (and not merely through syntactic integration and/or semantic shift, resulting in deideophonic verbs, nouns, or adjectives).¹ Notably, Treis identifies two productive Kambaata suffixes dedicated to deriving resultative adjectives and action nouns from ideophones respectively. Brill discusses the formation of deideophonic nouns, verbs and modifiers in Northern Amis. Quint shows that a verbalizing suffix is attested on a few intensifying ideophones of Casamance Upper Guinea Creole, and the resulting verb is a semantic equivalent to the collocation the ideophone originally occurred in. By contrast, in Archi it is the whole compound <ideophone + ‘say’> that is turned into an adjective. In the opposite direction, Guérois and Meyer mention productive **morphological processes of ideophonization**. In the case of Sena, intensifying ideophones are derived from verbs and are used in collocation with them. In the case of Amharic, a language with non-linear morphology, two templates for trilateral roots are used to create ideophones with intensive and attenuative readings from the corresponding verbs (and are used predicatively with a light verb). These templates are very productive, as Meyer notes. Moreover, they do not seem to be inherited from proto-Semitic or proto-Ethiosemitic.

As for the individual details surrounding ideophones in these different languages, readers are invited to refer to the articles collected here!

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¹ We are aware that the distinction between derivation and inflection (the latter being analyzable as a consequence of conversion or zero-derivation) can be tricky. Borderline examples in our contributions include Archi’s ideophonic compounds (ideophone + verb ‘say’) turned into adjectives via participle marking.

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