

(1b) Examples of types of sounds (Based on Hinton, et al. 1994:1-6)

Involuntary Sounds	Corporeal Sound Symbolism	Onomato-poeia	Synesthesia	Conventional Sound Symbolism	Developed Language
hiccuping sneezing	purposefully clearing one's throat	swish bang smack	low voice and vowel lengthening to represent large objects	'gl' in glitter glisten glow glimmer	most words in Language. Ex. dog, in, up, sit, ect.

Even though everything from hiccups to phonemes can now be classified by how the sound is related to the meaning, Silverstein points out that linguists have not gone much farther than Saussure in our understanding of sound on the denotational plane. He says that we are still “operating along the single dimension of signs as being denotationally iconic or denotationally arbitrary and, as it were, equating specific-system determination with arbitrariness.” Which is to say that we are operating as though the linear representation in (1a) is correct. This, he says, is “not really making use of the distinction between absolute and relative arbitrariness/motivation, even on the denotational plane” (Silverstein 1994:41). Ideophones seem to give us a way to make *real* use of the distinction between direct linkage between sound and meaning and indirect linkage between sound meaning.

Silverstein goes on to say that in sound symbolism, sound is functioning outside of the usual ways it functions in language, and is thus transmitting meaning on another level. The challenge is to “view denotational iconism as one of the ‘breakthrough’ modes of semiosis, in which a system of sound structure,...normally subordinated to virtual zero autonomous power with respect to reference-and-predication in the doubly articulated structure of language, undergoes a functional rank-shifting...into the plane of referential-and-predicated-function” (Silverstein 1994:42). Silverstein challenges us to consider the possibility that a sound symbolic utterance, i.e. one where there is an iconic relationship between the sound and the meaning expressed, is not at the level of a grunt or a moan that communicates nothing more than a person’s physical state, but is at some level that breaks through the usual high level of meaning conveyed in Language and adds another layer of expression. This is to say that we must revise the representation given in (1a) to one that is multi-layered or multi-dimensional instead of simply linear.

This paper accepts Silverstein’s challenge by showing that ideophones rightfully belong within the realm of true Language where sound is arbitrarily related to meaning. Once this is established, we can look at the extra-linguistic, but sound oriented, qualities that are exploited by speakers when they use these

forms, and maybe come closer to understanding how sound as sign can be used to mean. The examination of ideophones allows us to tease apart the distinction between the indirect linkage between sound and meaning, which is a result of ideophones being highly conventionalized forms of language, and direct linkage between sound and meaning, which is a result of the fact that people use ideophones in a sound symbolic way to represent other sounds or movements in nature. This paper further suggests that a possible method for understanding the function of sound on an extra-linguistic plane is to look at the usage of ideophones in social contexts that allow for the exploitation of a non-arbitrary relationship between sound and meaning.

2. Ideophones Defined

In this section, ideophones are situated within the study of sound symbolism. Sound symbolism is defined as “the direct linkage between sound and meaning” (Hinton, et al. 1994:1). Ideophones can draw on elements from onomatopoeic, synesthetic, and conventional sound symbolism. If an ideophone is onomatopoeic, it represents environmental sounds in an imitative way. (Animal sounds like “oink” and “meow” are examples of onomatopoeia in English.) If an ideophone is synesthetic, it will be an acoustic symbolization of non-acoustic phenomena. (An example of synesthesia in English is the use of the high front vowel ‘i’ and high pitch and to represent small size as in “It was an itty bitty puppy”.) If an ideophone can be described as conventional sound symbolism, there will be an analogical relationship between language specific phoneme clusters and meaning. (An example of this is the use of the cluster ‘sl’ in English to represent things that are wet or do not have much friction as in ‘slippery’, ‘slick’, ‘slide’ and ‘slimy’.) Alpher (Alpher 1994:161) says that “Ideophones are word-like elements that suggest the *sound*, in a highly conventionalized sense, that accompanies an action”. Sometimes they convey the feel of an action as much as the sound. Childs, in his discussion of African ideophones (Childs 1994:180), suggests that ideophones are more non-arbitrary than most forms of language and that their understanding should be “grounded in a theory of expressiveness”.

Childs’ treatment of Bantu ideophones is a good description of how ideophones draw on different aspects of sound symbolism. However, it is not the purpose of this paper to analyze the ideophones in Tsonga according to these categories of iconicity. The Tsonga ideophones collected for this paper can easily be categorized this way, and more extensive categorization may yield some interesting information about the range of possible relationships sound can have to meaning in different contexts. Further categorization might also reveal ways that sounds can come to convey meanings about “colour, taste, smell, silence, action, condition, texture, gait, posture, or intensity” (Finnegan 1970:64). In

partial response to a statement made by Childs that the way “ideophones are learned and transmitted has not been studied” (Childs 1994:198), this paper examines when and how ideophones are used in social contexts, and how their meanings are transmitted and understood by the user.

3. Ideophones Elicited

The writer of this paper had the opportunity in the fall of 1995 to work with a consultant from South Africa whose native language was Tsonga. The consultant, hereafter referred to as Thomas, shared several Tsonga stories that contained ideophones. Although extremely interested in the ideophones, the writer found that consultation of the dictionary was of little help in determining what the ideophones might mean. During a personal interview with Thomas, he read ideophones from the dictionary so the writer could hear what they sounded like. In that we were not in South Africa using ideophones in everyday contexts, the setting for hearing these ideophones was not completely ‘natural’. However, what emerged in the writer’s mind from both Thomas’s demonstration and explanation of Tsongan ideophones is that ideophones have a particularly social dimension. Below are two excerpts from stories that Thomas told that include the use of ideophones.

One of the stories Thomas told was about the trickster Hare who outsmarts the other animals in order to gain admission to the Elephant’s beer bash, to which he was not invited. When Hare is found out by Lion and Hyena, Hare has to come up with a quick plan of escape. Just as Hare sees his chance to get away, Thomas used two ideophones back-to-back to communicate Hare’s actions (ideophones are underlined throughout):

(3a) **Tsonga:** Xikan’we-kan’we a tlula: Gedle-gedle psiii.

IPA: /ʃikan we kan we a ʔula: gedle gedle pʃii/

Gloss: Suddenly he jumped: Gedle-gedle psiii.

Thomas told another story about a girl named Nyeleti who was given to a barren mother on the condition that Nyeleti never do any hard work. Later, while Nyeleti was living at her husband’s home, he had to go far away to find work. Conditions went from bad to worse, and one day the mother-in-law, who was very old, was forced to ask Nyeleti to pound some corn so they could eat. Thomas vocalized the sound of the pestle hitting the mortar several times with the words

(3b)

“Gi.....Gi.....Gi.....”.

The striking thing about these words was not so much the form of them, but the way Thomas vocalized them to give them meaning. The sound of them was so different than the sounds of the other words in the story that they stood out

in the flowing sounds of the narration. Seeing these ideophones on the pages of the dictionary offered hardly any idea of how these words should sound, even though the phonetic system employed in Tsonga was fairly straightforward, and the phonetic transcriptions of the ideophones were included. During the interview, Thomas looked at pages of the dictionary on where ideophones had been marked. Many of them he did not know, and he said they were used regionally. These he would skip over or read without any exaggerated inflection at all, but the ones he did know, he pronounced in a sound symbolic way. The meanings and the relationships between the words and the sounds became much clearer. It was like seeing the word “boing” on a page without ever hearing it, then having someone say,

(3c)

G”

I N

“BO

imitating a spring, starting the ‘b’ in a low voice and making the sound rise higher and higher in pitch as the mouth forms the rest of the phonemes.

4. Ideophones Voiced

To better understand how sound is at work in the usage of ideophones, we have to be able to share the sound. A phonetic transcription is not enough to convey what is being done by the speaker. In order to talk about them, we all have to be able to hear them, and since we communicate in the academic world through writing, an attempt has been made here to convey more directly what the ideophones sounded like. Below is a list of several of the ideophones Thomas used in the interview or in his stories. If the Tsonga/English dictionary (Cuenod 1991) had an entry for the ideophone being described, it is included. Otherwise, a definition given by the consultant is included. Falling and rising tones are indicated on the orthographic representation of the ideophones. Where possible, the sound of the Tsonga ideophone is related to sounds used sound symbolically in English. It is hoped that knowing the English iconic usage provided will help make the sound of the Tsonga ideophone more clear, and that the process of sounding out similar and familiar sounds in English will give the reader the experience of discovering the sound meaning of the Tsonga ideophones.

(4a) **gèdlè-gèdlè**: /gedle gedle/ “flutter, palpitate, as heart in sudden fright” (Cuenod 1991). This is the word Thomas used to show “getting ready to take off”. It sounds like ‘giddy up giddy up’ in English, but there is a definite break between the reduplication. Thomas would sometimes

use his hands for this one. He would plant his hands in front of him, slightly to one side, on the first “gedle” then quickly move them and plant them again in a different position on the second “gedle”. According to Thomas, it represents an evasive tactic of an animal whose trail has been picked up by a hunter.

(4b) psiii: /pʃii/ To disappear quickly. The /ʃ/ sound is sustained. It sounds like our ‘Shhhhh’ for ‘quiet’, except with an explosive ‘p’ at the beginning. The sound is made quickly and with rising intonation. Thomas would point his finger and move his hand quickly across his body and away. Something Americans do that has a similar effect is when we say, ‘It disappeared, *just* like that!’ where the ‘just’ is devoiced, said quickly, and accompanied by a snap of the fingers.

(4c) gi-gi-gi: /gi gi gi/ “Produce brief crisp thud” (Cuenod 1991). Notice the English sound symbolic words used in the definition. This ideophone is said in about as low a pitch as one can manage comfortably at intervals of about one second apart. The ‘g’ and the ‘i’ are both heavily voiced, and the ‘i’ is allowed to ring a little. A ghost story told by children in American culture might include a ‘bad guy’ coming up the stairs as in ‘You could hear his footsteps getting closer and closer: thump, thump, thump’. The slow deliberate quality of these ‘thumps’ are similar in rhythm and pitch to the ‘gi’ sounds of Nyeleti pounding the corn in Thomas’s story.

(4d) dlòmú: /dlomu/ “Plump into deep water, as big stone” (Cuenod 1991). This is said with a very iconic intonation. The “dlo” is started in the lower part of one’s pitch range, and the vowel is lowered even more. As one begins to pronounce the ‘m’, the tone is on the rise, and by the time the ‘u’ is said, one is at the higher middle part of one’s range. The ‘o’ is longer than the ‘u’. English does not have a conventionalized form of this sound. However, the writer is well aquatinted with people who can reproduce the sound of water dripping from a faucet by tapping a finger on the side one’s cheek as while forcing air out of a small rounded opening in the lips as the lower jaw is raised up to meet the upper jaw. This is the same sound represented by this Tsonga ideophone.

(4e) mpfèká-mpfèká: /mpfeka mpfeka/ “Something badly made, rickety, not firm, as basket, chair” (Cuenod 1991). This is actually pronounced in a repetition of three syllables. The ‘m’ is a quick, low hum, followed by the

falling ‘pè’ and then the rising ‘ká’. This is the sound that Thomas says the “Tsongas think they hear” springs make when one jumps on the bed or bounces on a bicycle seat. The triple rhythm of this ideophone can be seen in an English nursery rhyme that has nothing to do with beds or springs. The rhythm of mpfeka-mpfeka-mpfeka sounds like the rhythm of “To market---To market---to buy a---fat pig. Home again---Home again---jiggity---jig.”

(4f) fèhlè-fèhlè: / feθle feθle / Something soft and bouncy. This one is related to ‘mpfeka’ in that it also describes a bouncing motion, but it is used for bouncing on something soft and yielding like a fat couch. The ‘h’ becomes a /θ/ as the tongue approaches the ‘l’ position, and the word is said with a definite ‘up-down, up-down’ intonation reminiscent of rhythmic bouncing.

5. Ideophones contextualized

Caught up in the different sounds of Thomas’s pronunciation of the ideophones, the writer began to wonder about the notion that sound symbolism is the precursor to fully formed human language (Hinton 1994:11). While describing the ideophones in written English and repeating them aloud, it became clear that English speakers have at their disposal the same use of sound symbolism in certain forms of speech. A couple of times, Thomas read the ideophones he recognized without the iconic sound representation, driving home the fact that these ideophones are in fact highly conventionalized lexical forms whose inherent relationship to the sound is pretty far removed. This contradicts the possibility that ideophones are reminiscent of early forms of language. What Thomas was doing was infusing a particular lexical item with sound symbolic properties, not showing the word’s inherent sound symbolic characteristics. He was performing, in the same way that an English speaker would be performing if she were trying to explain “boing” to a non-English speaker by exaggerating the inflection in her voice (as in 3c). The difference between Tsonga ideophones and English sound symbolic words seems to be the degree to which sound symbolic items have become codified in Tsonga as lexical items.

So the question then is why do some languages use sound symbolism more than others, and why do some people feel more comfortable than others in exploiting sound iconicity to convey meaning? This is a cultural question, not a linguistic one, and the answers Thomas provided were cultural answers. When asked about the contexts in which ideophones were used, Thomas said ideophones often showed up in stories. He said that adults tell stories, usually a grandma or a

grandpa, and if neither of these are present, then one's mother will tell them. "That's how family values are transmitted from one generation to another," Thomas said, because stories all have at least one moral lesson to share. Stories are told, at least they were a few years ago, around the fireplace after supper, while eating roasted peanuts, corn on the cob, and jago beans. Different stories are told to children of different ages so that the moral lesson will be relevant to the child's experience.

When asked if ideophones were used in other contexts besides storytelling, Thomas said, "Oh, yes. We use them all the time." Finnegan comments on this everyday usage of ideophones when she writes, "the picturesque and imaginative forms of expression of many Bantu languages are particularly noticeable. These are often applied to even the commonest actions, objects, and descriptions" (Finnegan 1970:58). When asked, "When and how are ideophones used?" Thomas proceeded to tell more stories. Almost every ideophone discussed had a personal, contextualizing story to go with it to explain how and when these words infused with sound were used to mean. Below is a list of ideophones accompanied by the social contexts in which Thomas placed them to show how and when they would be used.

(5a) bi: /bi/ Said in very low pitch with a little bit of aspiration at the end. "Me and my younger brother used to go hunting, and we would take a big bag full of peanuts. Once we got there, we roasted them in dry leaves. We lived with my grandmother for a while, because my mother had gone to stay with my father who was working far away. When she would come home once a month to see us, she would say, "When I left there was a bag full of peanuts, and within a month, they are all gone, bi!"

(5b) chòlá-chòlá: /çola çola/ Said with much the same break between the reduplication as gedle-gedle. This is the sound of a big animal making noises in the bush while walking. "When my brother and I would go hunting, he would tell me, 'Don't just come along and chola-chola. You'll scare all the animals away!"

(5c) dlidlirita: /dlidlirita/ Said with a push from the diaphragm on the first two syllables to make a sound almost like a car engine trying to start. "If I push Debbie, and she lands in the corner, dlidlirita."

(5d) dlòrí-dlòrí: /dlori dlori/ Said while swaying a little from side to side with the intonation much like the one used for dlomu (above) although in an overall higher pitch and in a fast, repetitive rhythm to imitate the

pace of walking. “I know this one too. Among the Tsongas where there is no basketball, height is not a good thing, it’s not an asset. So...everybody looks at you this way and they say you go dlori-dlori-dlori because you are taller than everybody else...the seven guys are rare. I remember, I used to have this classmate of mine when I was a second grader. She was tall! She was tall. Well, you can imagine I was six then, and we had somebody about as tall as you are, and we called her dlori-dlori.”

(5e) **mbòò:** /mboo/ Said in a very low voice with a falling tone that is sustained until it fades away. “This would mean usually you are sad...Like, say for instance my parents married a girl for me and then two months later she disappeared. And then they say, ‘Mboo, mali ya tata’/mboo mali ya tata/ (*Mboo* , money of Dad)...Something is lost for good.”

(5f) **phyáphyàrhà:** /pfyapfyarha/ The ‘phy’ is devoiced but explosive. The first ‘phya’ rises and the vowel is cut short. The second ‘phya’ is longer and falling. “Have you ever made cornmeal? Well, you have boiling water, then you put corn meal and then you start mixing. Then you see air coming out, the kind of bubbles phya phyaphya phya. And then somebody will say, it used to be me in my family, my mom would be doing something else and she’d say to me, ‘Check and let me know when the porridge starts to phyaphyarha.’”

(5g) **bvanyangeta** and **yandlamela:** /bvanyangeta/ /yandlamela/ Thomas said these two words without any sound symbolism at first, but he said that ‘bvanyangeta’ was to pounce and ‘yandlamela’ was to sneak. When I asked him how he would use them, he said, “How would I say it? Well, I’ll say it in Tsonga...ximanga /fimaŋa/ (cat) xiyandlamela, xiyandlamela (said in a whisper) kondlo /kondlo/, kondlo is the mouse,(this phrase was spoken in a normal voice) xiyandlamela, xiyandlamela, xiyandlamela, xiBVANYANGETA!” The three xiyandlamela’s were whispered and as he said them he picked up speed until he exploded into full voice on the bvanyangeta.

In each of these little stories, Thomas used the ideophones in a sound symbolic way, either varying the volume of his voice, or the pitch, or the length of the sounds. By reporting actual speech, he showed that this exploitation of the sounds when speaking words is used in everyday situations like cooking, and in normal conversations between family members. These anecdotes were offered

almost as a definition of what the words meant. The fact that Tsongas use these sounds in stories is not different from the use of sound symbolic words in English stories, but the freedom to use them so often in everyday speech is not something usually taken advantage of by English speakers. Thomas offered a bit of insight into why this might be true when he said, “People usually like to exaggerate, Tsongas at least, like to exaggerate...These (ideophones) are kind of like hyperboles. It’s gross exaggeration. It’s like *mbvéé /mbvee/*, you die from the stink! People like to use them.” When Finnegan writes about ideophones in Bantu languages she says, “the acoustic impression often conveys aspects which, in English culture at least, are not normally associated with sound at all” (Finnegan 1970:64). It is not that English speakers cannot imagine an abstract relationship between things that can be expressed iconically in sound, they can and do, it is just that the Tsongas seem to do this more often because of their love for exaggeration, and because of the way they use stories and storytelling to transmit cultural ideas. By repeated usage, sound symbolic forms become codified into lexical items linguists call ideophones. At this point, the relationship between the sound and the meaning of the ideophone is arbitrary as it is in Language.

6. Ideophones redefined

The proliferation of ideophones in the Tsonga language can be explained by looking at Tsonga culture or even Tsonga language ideology. The fact that Tsongas have words they use sound symbolically for many specific and unrelated things points to a repeated choice made by speakers to use sound to convey meaning. The words themselves have a definite arbitrary relationship between sound and meaning which is manifested in Thomas’s ability to pronounce them without the sound symbolism, and in his concern that some ideophones may not be transmitted to the next generation. This places ideophones in the realm of Language where the relationship between sound and meaning is arbitrary (the far right on the continuum in 1a). When asked how children learn to use ideophones, Thomas said that the ones used for hunting might not be learned by children today because hunting has become prohibited by “conservationists and preservationists”. If the relationship between the sound of an ideophone and its meaning was inherent, it seems that its perception would be almost intuitive. The sound of a person walking through a bush would still sound like ‘chola-chola’ to a native Tsongan whether or not he was initiated into the native hunting traditions. In fact, a person walking through the bush should sound like ‘chola-chola’ to any non-Tsongan as well. The fact is that these ideophones are highly conventionalized lexical items like the other words in Language, but that a sound relationship is imposed on them to convey meaning on a level not usually

exploited by regular language usage. It is as if we are working on a continuum that may be parallel or tangential to the one described above, but we are no longer working only within it.

Now that we have established that we are no longer trying to understand how language may have evolved from a non-arbitrary relationship between sounds and things in nature (this is not to say that this is not in fact true, or that continued research in this area might not provide insights, but only to say that manifestations of sound symbolism in ideophones is a purposeful application of newly conceptualized relationships between sound and meaning imposed onto an arbitrary lexical form), we are free to look deeper at the sound meaning relationship of ideophones. One direction to look for a deeper understanding of the purpose of ideophones would be to look at the “poetics of linguistic expression as a functional plane distinct from denotation as such, to determine the contribution of (broadly speaking) ‘metrically’ organized form as one of the determinants of at least the native speaker’s feeling of sound symbolism attached to certain expressions” (Silverstein 1994:41). Silverstein suggests that there is a poetic function of language that is distinct from the usual denotation function of language, and that to explore the poetic function of language is to explore at the very least the feeling of a speaker that is attached to the use of the sound symbolic expression. How is it that when we use sound-as-iconic-manifestation of things that “sensation is immediate and is immediately translated into a word or a sound, a sound which is so appropriate, so fitting, that one sees the animal moving, hears the sound produced, or feels oneself the very sensation expressed” (Junod 1936:30-31)? Why is it that “to be used skillfully,...they (ideophones) must correspond to one’s inner feeling” (Fortune 1962:6)? These are questions that must seek answers in the behaviors and ideas of people as well as in the description of the linguistic forms used by them.

In the presentation of the above data, this paper has emphasized the similarities between common English sound symbolic utterances and Tsonga ideophones even though English cannot be said to contain proper ideophones in its vocabulary. The question raised by the difference in frequency of usage of sound symbolic items in Tsonga and English is, “What is it about our cultures that make us as individuals more or less likely to attempt to communicate with sound on an extra-linguistic plane?” Attempts to answer this question may lead to a better understanding of the human capacity to use and develop ways to communicate on multiple sensory and semantic levels, which will in turn lead to a multi-dimensional model of the relationship between sound and meaning in human language.

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