The interaction of syntax and expressivity in Siwu ideophones

1. Introduction

African, Asian and to a lesser extent Amerindian languages are known for their large inventories of ideophonic vocabulary (Voeltz and Kilian-Hatz 2001). Cross-linguistically, ideophones are marked by deviant phonotactics, expressive morphology, imagistic semantics, and syntactic aloofness. Ideophones in Siwu (na-Togo, Kwa, Niger-Congo) largely conform to this general pattern, but they show considerably more syntactic versatility than expected. This paper teases apart the interaction between syntactic integration and expressivity of ideophones (i.e. their affective/performative function, e.g., Kunene 1965; Diffloth 1972; Schiller 1995), shows how this interaction has implications both for ideophone typology and for the architecture of the syntax/semantics interface in RRG.

2. A working definition

(1) Ideophones are marked words that vividly depict sensory events.

Ideophones are marked in the simple sense that they stand out from other words in several ways, including special phonology, expressive morphology, syntactical aloofness, and prosodical foregrounding. Ideophones are words, i.e. minimal free forms that are conventionalized and listable (as opposed to, say, involuntary cries or nonce words). Ideophones are vivid, turning speaker into performer by conflating speech event and narrative event. Ideophones are depictions; that is, their mode of signification is depictive rather than descriptive. Depiction implies iconicity, a perceived resemblance between form and meaning and indeed ideophones are iconic (sound-symbolic) at several levels. Ideophones depict sensory events, a shorthand for a broad spectrum of sensual impressions that may include sensory perceptions, inner feelings and sensations

3. Ideophonic constructions in Siwu: examples from natural discourse

Utterance: Ideophone occurs on its own. This is relatively common, though less common than the next two constructions. The ideophone is maximally free, forming an utterance on its own; its interpretation however is context-dependent.

(2) sì á-bùà à-ta à-nyɔā s a-nɔmì nɛ̀ kpɔkɔlɛɛɛ! ²
if 2SG-intend 2SG-PROG 2SG-look 3SG:POSS CA:PL-eye TP... IDPH.bulging.INTX
(Suddenly a man appeared.) ‘If you’d look at his eyes... bulging kpɔkɔlɛɛɛ!’

(3) Alɛ Kàntɔ kùgɔ ɔsæ ɔs-bra ɔ a-ra lo. Tsintsin.tsintsintsin!
like NAME how 3SG-HAB 3SG-do his things UFP. IDPH.neatly.INT3
‘Just like Kàntɔ, the way he does his stuff. Tsintsintsin!’

¹ See http://ideophone.org/working-definition/ for elaboration and motivation.
² Abbreviations used include: 1 first person, 2 second person, 3 third person, Ax agreement where x is the noun class (e.g. i, ka, ku, ɔ), ADJ adjectival marker, Cx noun class marker where x is the class, DEM demonstrative, FOC focus, HAB habitual, IDPH ideophone, INDEF indefinite, INGR ingressive, INTX expressive intensification where x is an impressionistic measure of intensity, NAME proper name, NEG negative, PF perfective, PL plural, POSS possessive, PROG progressive, PST past, REFL reflexive, SG singular, TP topic marker, U undergoer, UFP utterance final particle.
(4) Si lò-pe lò-finiki … kpiaàà
if 1SG-beat 1SG-turn … IDPH.violent_clash
‘I’m about to turn … BANG!’

(5) So ikòdze, so ikòdze… gbogoro-gbo!
elephant ci-skin elephant ci-skin… IDPH.tough
‘Elephant skin, elephant skin… tough!’

Adverbial: Ideophone as modifier within a predicate phrase. Together with the attributive construction, this is the most common ideophonic construction in a corpus of natural discourse.

(6) itì si i-fudza-ɔ fututu.tutututu
ci-head if ci-be.white-2SG.U IDPH.white.INT4
‘That your head may become purely white futututututu!’

(7) bo kagbàmìkù gaǹgbe ne, ka-ɔ-lo ma kanana.nananananana
our area cka-DEM FOC, ING-he-silence them IDPH.silent.INT5
‘Our area, he silenced them kanananananananana!’

(8) Kɔ̀ku ɔ̀-ye i-ra-ɔ kpɔkɔ̀tkpɔ̀kɔ̀tɔ
NAME 3SG-talk ci-thing-INDEF IDPH.messy
‘Kofi is talking nonsense’ (‘Kofi is talking stuff kpɔkɔ̀tkpɔ̀kɔ̀tɔ’)

(9) a-ɔ-busi a-fore só waaà
2SG-PF-open 2SG-pour.on REFL IDPH.splash
(When you take a bath,) ‘you pour [water] on yourself waaa’

Attributive: Ideophone as complement of a two-place predicate. This is quite like an identity construction; it involves verbs like se ‘be’, ba ‘have’, bara ‘make’ and the perceptual verb nyo ‘look’. The first three are largely interchangeable, the latter is only used for ideophones with a visual meaning component.

(10) kù-wà go-ngbe kù-nyo ddbɔ○○○
Cku-stuff Aku-DEM Cku-look IDPH.soft.INTx
‘This stuff here, it looks soft ddbɔ○○○’

(11) kà ɔ-bra gelegele.gelegele
ING ci-make IDPH.shiny.INT2
‘It will be shiny gelegelegelegele!’

(12) i-nyo wósɔ̀rò.ò — ma-i-plastà
ci-look IDPH.rough.INTx — 3PL;PST-NEG-plaster
‘it looks rough wósɔ̀rò, they haven’t plastered (it)’

Predicative: Ideophone as head of a predicate phrase. In this construction the ideophone bears subject agreement morphology just like a normal verb would. Unlike verbs, however, ideophones never get tense/aspect markers. Negation occurs rarely but is not impossible.

(13) fɔ n-gba mi-gggɔlɔ
2SG.POSS cmi-legs cmi-IDPH.twisted
‘Your legs are twisted’
Adjectival: ideophone as modifier within a referential phrase. This construction involves an adjectival suffix –à. Significantly, this suffix can be tacked onto stative verbs in the same way (20).

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Table 1. The interaction of syntactic integration and expressive features.
4. The interaction of syntactic integration and expressivity

Table 1 above shows the interaction of syntactic integration and expressivity for the four main Siwu ideophonic constructions. A tighter integration of the ideophone into the sentence, as in the predicative and adjectival constructions, comes with a loss of expressive potential. Thus, morphologically bound ideophones are less susceptible to free reduplication and lengthening; they are less often performatively foregrounded; and they are less prone to be accompanied by iconic gestures. There is thus a tradeoff between syntactic integration and expressive potential.

An important finding from my study of ideophones in natural discourse is that ideophones are more than a vivid narrative device, and that they may be recruited for more mundane tasks (Dingemanse 2009). Ideophones can fill various niches in the linguistic ecology of a language, the niches varying in the degree of expressivity they allow. This pattern has implications for the typology of ideophonic systems, as it relates to the broader issue of the relation between syntactic categories and expressivity.

Languages may have different tradeoff points along the axis of interaction sketched in the paper, and may recruit different linguistic resources for them. As an illustration, take the simplified diagram to the right. Point (1) would represent a language in which ideophones are always very much aloof from syntax, as in the Aslian language Semai (Diffloth 1976; Schiller 1995). A somewhat intermediate position (2) would be occupied by languages like Japanese and Siwu, where ideophones are relatively well-behaved but still can be performatively foregrounded (Kita 1997; Toratani 2007). Finally, point (3) could represent a language like Somali, where ideophones have been described as less expressive due to their nominal character (Dhoorre and Tosco 1998).

5. A paradox

Van Valin (2006:166) outlines an interaction between the hierarchies of semantic relations and syntactic relations, and proposes a principle governing this interaction: ‘the closer the semantic relation between two propositions, the stronger the syntactic link joining them is’. Even though this proposal holds up quite well crosslinguistically, it appears that ideophones form an exception.

Despite the various degrees of integration available for ideophones in Siwu, the two bound construction types (Predicate and Adjectival) account for only 10% of ideophone tokens in a corpus of natural discourse in Siwu, whereas the great majority of tokens (88%) occurs in the

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3 See Akita (2009:275ff) for a related and independently developed idea.
4 The diagram is a simplification in the following ways: first, trivially, the diagram only presents one slice of the multidimensional variation exhibited by ideophonic systems; and secondly, as the Siwu data shows, it is probably not a language that should occupy one point on the diagram, but rather its ideophonic constructions which show varying degrees of expressivity and syntactic integration — pace Dwyer & Moshi (2003), who hypothesize that expressivity (or lack thereof) is a function of individual ideophones; in Siwu (and I suspect in many more ideophonic languages), the same ideophone can occur in different constructions.
Utterance, Adverbial, and Attributive constructions — i.e. those with the loosest syntactic linkage. At the same time, there is a tight semantic link between the ideophone and the utterance that it occurs with, with ideophones even contributing aspectual semantics (cf. also Nuckolls 1996 on Pastaza Quechua; Toratani 2007 on Japanese). In fact, the tight linkage, especially in aspectual semantics, is a reason for Toratani to postulate that ideophones ('mimetics') in Japanese can modify the nucleus of the clause. Thus, ideophones combine close semantic linkage (the top of Van Valin's semantic relations hierarchy) with loose syntactic linkage (the bottom of Van Valin's syntactic relations hierarchy), forming a counterexample to the proposal.

A possible explanation for this paradox is offered by the suggestion that ideophones employ a dimension of meaning that is distinct from the compositional/propositional/analytic dimension — an expressive mode of meaning, in which affect and various kinds of sensory imagery play a crucial role (Diffloth 1972; Kita 1997). Some well-documented facts about ideophones are neatly explained by this proposal: their seeming semantic redundancy; their resistance to logical negation; high association with expressive intonation and spontaneous iconic gestures; and the commonality of iconicity as a mode of signification.5

But mere explanation doesn’t solve the paradox. If an explanation along these lines is deemed plausible, it follows that there is a need for theories of grammar — and especially those in which semantics plays a central role — to worry about the type of expressive meaning represented most clearly by ideophones, which may interface with syntax in ways not foreseen by current syntax-semantics interface architectures. In the scope of this short paper, this challenge for RRG and its kin will have to remain unaddressed; but I hope to have shown that ideophones are a linguistic device to be reckoned with.

6. References


5 To this list, adduced by Kita (1997) on the basis of Japanese ideophones, we may add two further features related to expressive meaning: the conflation of speech event and narrated event (ideophones recreate events in the here and now, they probably do not exhibit displacement), and the association with expressive morphology (on-the-fly lengthening and reduplication).


