

Ideophones

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Many of the world's languages feature an open lexical class of ideophones, words whose marked forms and sensory meanings invite iconic associations. Ideophones (also known as mimetics or expressives) are well-known from languages in Asia, Africa and the Americas, where they often form a class on the same order of magnitude as other major word classes and take up a considerable functional load as modifying expressions or predicates. Across languages, commonalities in the morphosyntactic behaviour of ideophones can be related to their nature and origin as vocal depictions. At the same time there is ample room for linguistic diversity, raising the need for fine-grained grammatical description of ideophone systems. As vocal depictions, ideophones often form a distinct lexical stratum seemingly conjured out of thin air; but as conventionalized words, they inevitably grow roots in local linguistic systems, showing relations to adverbs, adjectives, verbs and other linguistic resources devoted to modification and predication.

Introduction

At least since the 1850s linguists have recognized that many languages have a sizable lexical class of words that depict sensory scenes. A commonly accepted cross-linguistic term for these words today is IDEOPHONES, though 'mimetics' and 'expressives' are also used in the prolific fields of Japanese and South-East Asian linguistics (Voeltz & Kilian-Hatz 2001; Akita & Pardeshi 2019). Ideophones have long been studied for their striking phonological features, their iconic associations between form and meaning, and their rhetorical uses. Here I survey the topic from the point of view of word classes. How can we characterize ideophones as a cross-linguistic category? What is the morphosyntactic behaviour of ideophones across languages? And how do ideophones relate to other word classes such as adjectives, adverbs, and verbs?

For comparative purposes, we can define ideophones as an open lexical class of marked words that depict sensory imagery (Dingemanse 2019). The definition has five elements. First, ideophones form an OPEN LEXICAL CLASS, i.e. a group of words open to new additions. Second, ideophones are MARKED: their structural make-up is distinctive

relative to other classes of words, especially in terms of phonology and prosody. Third, ideophones are WORDS, or more precisely lexical items with conventional meanings. Fourth, ideophones DEPICT: they use a mode of signification that highlights iconic associations between aspects of form and meaning. And fifth, their meanings lie in the domain of SENSORY IMAGERY, evoking rich sensory scenes in colourful ways. Each of these elements has been the target of much research. Here I will highlight only those most relevant for an understanding of ideophones in the context of word classes across languages.

Defining ideophones as an open lexical class means that we can recognize them as a widespread linguistic phenomenon independently from their morphosyntactic status in particular languages. Seeing them as words with a depictive mode of signification helps us distinguish them from interjections and helps explain remarkable crosslinguistic commonalities, as we will see below. And observing that they evoke sensory imagery draws attention to their colourful meanings and indicates that in many languages they go far beyond onomatopoeia, the minor subclass of sound-imitatives that has historically been seen as the main example of lexicalised depictions in spoken languages.

Distinguishing ideophones and interjections

Although we will come to the relation between ideophones and other word classes, there is one matter we need to address up front: the difference between ideophones and interjections (Poggi 2009; Meinard 2015). These are formally and functionally distinct classes in any language for which we have good descriptions, but somehow they are easily conflated or even confused (Dialo 1985; Landar 1985; Hofstede 1999; Haiman 2018). There are indeed some superficial similarities between the two. Both ideophones and interjections seem quite expressive. Both are said to be able to make up stand-alone utterances. And both are often described as having anomalous phonology and phonotactics. However, on closer inspection, the differences outweigh the similarities on all counts.

MODE OF SIGNIFICATION. Both ideophones and interjections may seem to be broadly about sensory and emotional experiences. But they differ in the nature of this aboutness. Ideophones are typically depictions *of* events, while interjections are typically responses *to* them. Perhaps a slap in the face will help the reader to appreciate the difference. The *sound* of the slap is the main business of an ideophone to depict; your *outcry* in response to it is an interjection. The semiotic difference is exactly parallel to that between icon and index, and is also seen in the associated lexical items: ‘slap’ bears an iconic similarity to the sound of a strike with the open hand; whereas ‘ow!’ harkens back to an instinctive pain vocalization that provides indexical evidence of your feeling but is not itself iconic of that feeling. Each of them is non-arbitrary in its own way.

MORPHOSYNTAX. Both ideophones and interjections are aloof from sentential syntax, but in different ways and for different reasons. Interjections are by definition one-word utterances. Ideophones tend to appear at utterance edge, but rarely on their own. One source of confusion may be the cross-linguistically common use of ideophones use in quotative-like constructions (as in “The car went *vroom*”). If we peel down such constructions it seems the kernel is a one-word utterance “Vroom” that is similar to the one-word utterances we call interjections (compare: “The reader went *ow!*”). As the car goes *vroom*, so the reader goes *ow!*, and we may feel there is a deeper kinship. However, this would be a category mistake. Quotations can incorporate just about any sensory scene we may wish to depict (Clark & Gerrig 1990; Keevallik 2010), including someone producing an interjection, as here. This does not imply that the depicted material is alike. Likewise, the fact that an interjection like *ow!* can be used to mimic being in pain does not warrant the conclusion that it is therefore of one kind with the lexicalised depictions we call ideophones.

MARKEDNESS. Ideophones tend to use the phonological system to the fullest, rearranging and extending it in creative yet systematic ways. If they stray outside of the existing inventory, they do so by stretching or contracting it, filling gaps, adding secondary articulations, or playing with tonal melodies (Mithun 1982; Nuckolls et al. 2016; Diffloth 1979). Interjections, in contrast, under-use the larger phonological inventory and at the same time easily recruit elements that bear no systematic relation to the larger system, like the click in the disapproving *tsk* and the bilabial trill in the transition display *brrr* (Goffman 1978; Gil 2013; Pillion et al. 2019). Ideophones and interjections are each structurally distinct from other word classes in their own way. If we think of the phonology of ordinary words as providing the harmonic backbone to a jazz piece, ideophones are the solos soaring above it, and interjections the percussive elements that build the tight groove holding it all together.

A century ago, ‘interjections’ formed the catch-all bin for anything with a complicated relation to sentential syntax, including the lexicalised depictions we now call ‘ideophones’. Today however we have ample theoretical and empirical reasons to recognize interjections and ideophones as meaningfully different. Distinguishing them matters in theoretical debates. When Evans & Levinson (2009) drew attention to ideophones as a major word class that had flown under the radar of mainstream linguistics, one of the replies cited “response cries such as *yum*, *splat*, *hubba-hubba*, *pow!*” (Pinker & Jackendoff 2009) as evidence that English had something similar. The cited words form a motley crew of exclamations (*yum*, *hubba-hubba*) and sound imitatives (*splat*, *pow*), and the notion that the latter would be “response cries” evokes visions of wide-eyed English speakers uttering *splat!* anytime something hits the ground and going *pow!* at every unexpected blast. This kind of oversimplification obscures meaningful distinctions between word classes and contributes to the marginalization of ideophones as a major word class. More generally, distinguishing ideophones and

interjections matters for our ability to understand and explain language structure. If we lump them together, we lose the ability to explain how and why they differ in terms of markedness, morphosyntax and mode of signification.

An open lexical class that has eluded word class debates

In one sense, the class of ideophones is quite similar to other open word classes in many languages: it often consists of a large set of items that fit core definitional properties rather well, and fuzzy edges where it shades into other word classes (Childs 1994; Ibarretxe-Antuñano 2017). Yet there is a telling difference. Traditional word classes like nouns, verbs and adjectives periodically elicit high-stakes theoretical debates focusing on the nature of parts of speech, their cross-linguistic distribution, and the possibility of recognizing language-specific stem classes as instantiating putative universal categories (Dixon 1977; Kinkade 1983; Wetzler 1996; Croft 2001; Croft & van Lier 2012). In contrast, ideophones tend to be approached from the other side as it were: they stand out as speech heard in a special way even before one has started to consider their grammatical status.

Mundari, an Austroasiatic language of India, offers a useful example. The fluidity of its word class system has been a site of considerable debate ever since an early grammar claimed that its lexical items could function flexibly as nouns, verbs, adjectives and so on (Hoffmann 1903). Contributions to the debate rely on subtle distributional facts and intricate theoretical arguments to argue for or against recognizing distinct noun-like and verb-like word classes in the language (Evans & Osada 2005; Peterson 2005; Hengeveld & Rijkhoff 2005; Croft 2005). Amidst the theoretical skirmishes it is easy to overlook that one large class of content words in the language comes off scot-free: ideophones, or to use the regionally appropriate term of trade, expressives. Like most Austroasiatic languages, Mundari has long been described as having a distinct class of these words (Osada 1992). Nor is this a minor class: a dedicated dictionary documents at least 1500 unique lemmas (Badenoch & Osada 2019) and they are “found in most all arenas of language use” (Badenoch et al. 2019: 4). And yet the status of this considerable lexical stratum in the language has not featured in any word class debates.

How does a major class elude any mention in theoretical debates focused on the fundamentals of word classes in a language? One reason for this touches directly on the nature of ideophones. In the words of Felix Ameka, “ideophones are first and foremost a type of words” (Ameka 2001). This statement, which may seem a bit tautological at first, is appropriate in talking about ideophones because they are structurally and semiotically recognizable as special. Mundari ideophones for instance are primarily identified by their reduplicative forms and highly detailed semantics (Osada et al. 2020). The recognizability of ideophones as a lexical class means that it is often possible to identify them by ostension (‘words like this’) and to forego careful description of their morphosyntactic profile. Paradoxically then, the fact that Mundari ideophones stand

out as a distinct lexical class has enabled us to stop short of learning about their proper place in the larger system of word classes in the language.¹

Getting this right is not merely a matter of language-specific description; it also affects typological generalizations. Take typological work on adjectives, which classifies languages in terms of the kind of adjective classes they exhibit (Dixon 1977; Dixon & Aikhenvald 2004). Ideophones have generally been kept out of the relevant comparisons, despite the fact that in many languages they share semantic and grammatical features with word classes identified as adjectival. The surprising result is that languages like Igbo or Ewe are in a kind of quantum superposition with regard to their place in the larger typology of adjectives: they may count as having either a tiny closed class or an enormous open class of adjectives, depending on whether ideophones have been observed or not (Ameka 2001). Something similar holds for typological work on adverbs: ideophones are sometimes noted for their semantic and structural overlap with adverbs, but more often they are excluded due to scope limitations (Hallonsten Halling 2018). Such extreme observer dependence does not bode well for the generalizability of typological classifications. At the very least, this means we must improve our grasp of the morphosyntactic profile of ideophones within and across languages.

Case study: expressive adverbials in Jamsay

Jamsay, a Dogon language spoken in Mali, provides an instructive case study of how the apparent tension between cross-linguistic commonalities and language-specific realizations can play out (Heath 2019). Besides the usual major stem classes of noun, adjective, and verb, Dogon languages have an open stem class for which Heath proposes the descriptive term “expressive adverbials”. The items in this class form a distinct lexical stratum, are “uninflectable” and “grammatically marginal”, and do not enter into regular processes of tonosyntax. As Heath concludes, many of them “fit current definitions of ideophones (marked forms, sensory imagery)” (ibid, p. 18).² Some are illustrated in (1).

- | | | |
|---|-----------------------------------|--|
| 1 | Jamsay (Dogon) (Heath 2019: 5–6). | |
| a | <i>dém</i> → | ‘straight (object, road, trajectory)’ |
| b | <i>gǔǔ</i> → | ‘jutting out’ |
| c | <i>pép</i> | ‘chock-full, full to the brim’ |
| d | <i>kák</i> | ‘stopping/arriving abruptly (noisily)’ |

¹ Descriptions of Mundari expressives typically focus on word-level structural and semantic characteristics. Individual examples show predicative as well as loose appositional uses (Badenoch & Osada 2019), but their morphosyntactic profile awaits systematic description.

² While the cross-linguistic similarities stand out, Heath stops short of identifying Jamsay expressive adverbials as “ideophones” and stresses the importance of “delving into individual grammars, only loosely guided by crosslinguistic categories” (Heath 2019: 4).

d	<i>béɾpé-béɾpé</i>	‘flickering, glimmering’
e	<i>jáɾálálá</i>	‘moving (light, child’s toy kite)’
f	<i>táw-táw</i>	‘(very) fast’

Structurally, Jamsay expressive adverbials are characterized by final lengthening (marked with ‘→’), by CVC shapes with final obstruents that are otherwise disallowed in the language (1c), and by several forms of full and partial reduplication (1d-f). Both lengthening and reduplication can be varied for rhetorical purposes. These features are in line with what we know from ideophones across languages, and receive a straightforward explanation if we think of them as originating in the depictive use of linguistic material. Here as elsewhere, ideophones freely exploit the expressive resources of phonology and prosody for depictive purposes.

At the same time, and as with all word classes, there are important language-specific intricacies to Jamsay expressive adverbials. At first sight they are quite similar to adjectives like *bán* ‘red’, as shown by the fact that both can be used as stative predicates using a copula-like auxiliary *kò* (2a,b). However, their paths diverge under negation: whereas the predicative colour adjective is negated using a negative clitic =*lá* (3a), predicative expressive adverbials require the negative form of the locational-existential quasi-verb (3b).³ Moreover, to use them as adnominal modifiers, expressive adverbial predicates like (2b) need to be embedded into a relative clause with a participial ‘be’ quasi-verb (3c). From this and other evidence, Heath concludes that Jamsay expressive adverbials like *gǔǔ^m→* and *kin* are not adjectival, but rather form one-word adverbial phrases.

2 Jamsay (Dogon) (Heath 2019: 7–9)⁴

- | | |
|---|----------------------------|
| a | <i>bán kò</i> |
| | red be.NONH |
| | ‘It is red.’ |
| b | <i>gǔǔ^m→ kò</i> |
| | jutting.EA be.NONH |
| | ‘It is jutting out.’ |

³ Incidentally, the evidence from negation here allows us to nuance the view that ideophones are categorically “not subject to negation” (Kilian-Hatz 2006). As with many properties of culturally evolving linguistic systems, it is more useful to speak in terms of tendencies rather than absolutes, and to explain regularities rather than expect exceptionless rules. For instance, the fact that ideophones are unlikely to be negated in everyday language use can be straightforwardly explained by their nature as depictions (just as direct quotation is used more often to report what someone said rather than what they did not say). But this functionally motivated generalization does not preclude the occasional negative use (again, just as in rare cases, it may be important to stress what someone did *not* say).

⁴ Glosses as in the original, with the only difference that I have marked expressive adverbials with “EA”

- 3 a *bán=lá-φ*
 red=STAT.NEG-3SG.SJB
 ‘He/she/it is not red.’
 b *gǔʝⁿ → kâ:-rɔ̌*
 jutting.EA be.NONH-NEG
 ‘It is not jutting out.’
 c *kòmò^L gǔʝⁿ → kâ:-φ*
 back^L jutting.EA be.NONH.PPL-NONH
 ‘(a/the) back that is jutting out’

One further wrinkle can serve to display the intricate mixture of language-specific and cross-linguistically convergent features we find in any ideophone system. In the tonosyntax of Jamsay Dogon, adjectives control tone-dropping of the preceding noun. Expressive adverbials do not in general have the same effect, which is another reason to distinguish them from adjectives. However, sometimes expressive adverbials do have tonal effects on their immediate environment. For instance, in the example below, the expressive adverbial *dém-dém*, an expressively modified form of *dém* → ‘straight’, seems to cause the preceding noun *tègú* ‘speech’ to tone-drop to *tègù* (4a):

- 4 Jamsay (Dogon) (Heath 2019: 13–14)
 a [*á tègù*] [*dém-dém kâ:-rɔ̌*]
 2SG.POSS speech straight.EA be.NONH-NEG
 ‘Your talk is not straight (candid).’
 b [*á tègù*]↓ *dém-dém* ...

Is this evidence that expressive adverbials like *dém* → may be similar to adjectives after all, or is something else going on? In Heath’s analysis (shown in 4b), the effect is not tonosyntactic at all: it is “an intonationally motivated and phonetically variable pitch-lowering, whose effect is to make the following [expressive adverbial] more salient acoustically” (Heath 2019: 14). Without this lowering, the final high tone of *tègú* would distract from the following expressive adverbial; with it, the expressive adverbial stands out more clearly from the surrounding material.

While this may seem to be a notable quirk of Jamsay (and a testimony to the acuity of the observer), it happens to be perfectly in line with cross-linguistic generalizations about the prosody of ideophones in relation to their depictive nature. Recent work recognises three non-exclusive depiction marking strategies often found in combination with ideophones (Akita 2020): ideophones may be marked as depictions by framing (e.g., with quotative markers), by foregrounding (e.g., exaggerated prosody on the ideophone), or by backgrounding (e.g., by deemphasizing the non-ideophonic part to

draw out the ideophone more clearly). The process described for Jamsay expressive adverbials by Heath appears to be a clear example of the backgrounding strategy.

The overall picture that emerges is a combination of recurrent features that make ideophones recognizable as a comparative concept (Dingemanse 2019), and morphosyntactic intricacies that show their integration into local linguistic systems. In Childs' apt formulation, this is how ideophones "reconcile the twin dicta of 'be different' and 'be recognizably language'" (Childs 2014). Even if ideophones are structurally marked and recognizable as lexicalised depictions, they are not insulated from other aspects of the language. Nothing in language is. The mere fact of being built from recognizably linguistic material opens up ideophones to being coopted by morphosyntactic processes, undergoing semantic change, and eroded by frequent usage. This also means that ideophone inventories, as open lexical classes, can be as much in flux as other word classes: they are open to new additions but may also undergo attrition.

Unity and diversity in grammatical functions

There is an old and widespread idea that ideophones have no syntax worth speaking of, or even that they "cannot be generated by the grammar" (Voorhoeve 1964). This is not in line with current understandings of the morphosyntax of ideophones. Although ideophones definitely take some syntactic liberties (Diffloth 1972; Childs 1994), they rarely show up all on their own, and indeed the ways they "burrow into the grammar" (Heath 2019) are worthy of careful description. But how can we reconcile the tension between the notions that ideophones are prototypically aloof yet also linguistically integrated?

The answer is that the diversity is not endless, and a large part of it can be captured in terms of a single generalization: the morphosyntax of ideophones within and across languages owes much to the nature and origin of ideophones as depictive words. There are two parts to this generalization. First, the most prototypical ideophone constructions show strong convergence across languages because ideophones are fundamentally depictive words. Second, the grammatical realization of ideophones within languages can be understood as a consequence of what happens when depictive material gets in the grip of grammar. Let's discuss each of these in turn.

The prototypical relation between descriptive utterances and depictive words like ideophones is much like that between a text and its accompanying illustrations. The illustrations need a degree of freedom to be recognized as images: they need to be framed or set apart from the text in some way. But they also need a degree of proximity to the text to be recognized as accompaniments. The result is that text and image are clearly distinct, yet support each others' interpretations. This is, at base, how ideophones work (Kunene 1965; Nuckolls 1996; Güldemann 2008). They use speech in a special way, inviting listeners to see structural similarities —iconic associations—

between their spoken forms and the sensory scenes they depict. In order to be recognizable as depictions, ideophones need some degree of freedom. In order to support and be supported by the surrounding descriptive material, they tend to co-occur with some speech. Some key cross-linguistic similarities in ideophone morphosyntax fall out from this: their common appearance in quotative-like constructions; their frequent loose appositional relation to sentential syntax; and their antipathy to morphological operations like inflection and negation.

At the same time, there is room for considerable language-specificity in terms of morphosyntactic functions and word class status. In some languages like Zulu, Semai or Japanese, ideophones may be recognized as a distinct part of speech — indeed it was this distinctive status that moved Doke to introduce ‘ideophone’ as a novel grammatical category in the description of Bantu languages (Doke 1935). In others like Jamsay, Gbaya or Upper Necaxa Totonac, their use as predicate qualifiers motivates treating them as part of a larger adverbial class (Roulon-Doko 2001; Beck 2008). In yet others like Hausa and Tera, there are ideophonic subclasses of verbs, adverbs and adjectives (Newman 1968). There are also languages like Ewe and Basque in which ideophones show evidence of multicategoriality, allowing predicative and attributive uses while remaining mostly free of inflectional or derivational morphology (Ameka 2001; Ibarretxe-Antuñano 2017).

Although the diversity in grammatical functions may seem bewildering at first, there is method to the madness, and again the depictive nature of ideophones can help us understand it. The key observation is that not all kinds of meanings are equally easy to express by means of vocal depiction. It is hard to depict an object in speech, but much easier to evoke aspects of its sound, the irregularity of its shape, the roughness of its surface, or the wobbling way in which it moves. Speech can do all these things because it offers a rich bundle of acoustic features, articulatory gestures and phonological contrasts that can ground cross-modal iconic associations (Bühler 1934; Jakobson & Waugh 1979; Ahlner & Zlatev 2010). It follows that ideophones, as lexicalised vocal depictions, lend themselves well to expressing properties and actions, and serving functions of predication and modification.

We can overlay this observation about the semiotics of depiction in speech onto a widely used conceptual framework for grammatical categories (Croft 1990), usefully extended by Hallonsten Halling to make room for adverbs (Hallonsten Halling 2018: 38). If the meanings of ideophones tend to evoke properties and actions, not objects; and if their discourse functions are more likely to involve modification and predication than reference; then those areas are the ones where we should expect to see them turn up. And sure enough, for each of the structural coding categories found in the union of these areas (Table 1) it is easy to find examples of ideophones being connected to, or realisable as, that category: adjectives in Ewe (Ameka 2001), adverbs in Gbaya (Roulon-Doko 2001), predicate adjectives in Japanese (Akita 2009), verbs in Shona

(Fortune 1971), converbs in Wolaitta (Amha 2010), and relative clauses in Jamsay (Heath 2019). In short, the kinship of ideophones to adjectives, adverbs, and verbs emerges as a consequence of the affordances for depicting sensory imagery in speech.

Table 1. Semantic classes and discourse functions (Hallonsten Halling – Croft model). Given the semiotic affordances of depiction in speech, ideophones are most likely to show up in areas shown in black.

	Reference	Modification		Predication
		of reference	of predication	
Objects	NOUNS	genitive, adjectivizations, PPs on nouns	PPs on verbs	predicate nominals, copulas
Properties	deadjectival nouns	ADJECTIVES	ADVERBS	predicate adjectives, copulas
Actions	action nominals, complements, infinitives, gerunds	participles, relative clauses	converbs	VERBS

The best way to think about this table is as visualizing likely landing grounds for lexicalised vocal depictions. As vocal depictions, ideophones originate on a different plane, where sound and sense are intertwined. Evidence for this is that ideophone inventories typically form a separate stratum of original root material that shows no clear relations to existing vocabulary. But as linguistic signs, they inevitably intersect at some point with the more prosaic plane of grammatical systems that structure and canalize linguistic resources. Note that the point is not that ideophone-like items must necessarily be realised as one of the structural coding categories mentioned here; these are just some of the nooks and crannies that ideophones may come to inhabit when they become enmeshed with morphosyntax. In languages like Ewe, Basque, or Semelai, a separate word class of ideophones can flexibly fulfil roles of modification and predication in ways that partially supplant categories like adverbs and adjectives.

Scope limitations prevent cashing out the full implications of these observations, but this is an area that is sure to yield important generalizations in terms of typological distributions, semantic maps, and pathways for language change. We can already begin to sketch some of them. It may be that the typological profile of a language influences likely landing places for ideophones. For instance, in languages that typically separate

the lexical expression of manner from motion, ideophones may be more likely to occur adverbially (Schaefer 2001). From the perspective of language change, the table may help us understand and predict pathways for deideophonization. Bantu languages are generally described as featuring an open lexical class of ideophones that must be recognized as a distinct part of speech (Doke 1935). Certain Bantu languages show evidence of a process of deideophonization in which some ideophonic roots become more like verbs. For instance, in Tsonga a subset of ideophones appears with agreement morphology typical of verbs (Msimang & Poulos 2001; Marivate 1983), while others tend to appear in a quotative frame more typical of ideophones in Bantu. The two realizations exist in parallel, indicating a degree of flexibility or perhaps an ongoing process of deideophonization (Dingemanse & Akita 2017).

Halfway around the world, Aslian languages of the Malay Peninsula provide a picture of a possible outcome of such a process of deideophonization. Semai (Central Aslian) and Semelai (Southern Aslian) are in many ways prototypical ideophone languages, with large class of ideophones (called ‘expressives’ in this part of the world) that are maximally free and behave in every respect as expected of prototypical ideophones (Diffloth 1976; Tufvesson 2011; Kruspe 2004). However, two Northern Aslian languages, Jahai and Maniq, show no synchronic evidence of an open lexical class of this kind (Burenhult & Majid 2011; Wnuk 2016). Instead, these languages have a minor class of stative verbs that covers some of the same semantic domains. The clinching evidence is that we find cognate forms that function as expressives in one language but function as stative verbs in another (e.g., Semai *pŋūs* ‘(expr) of mold; wet fur’ versus Jahai *pʔus* ‘(v) moldy or musty odour’). Given that most present-day Aslian languages have an open class of expressives, this may well be the ancestral state, with historical change bringing about their assimilation to the verb class in Jahai and Maniq.

In closing: lessons for the typology of word classes

Even if ideophones often come in great numbers, they have rarely been considered one of the major word classes, which appears to be an honour reserved for the traditional Latinate categories of noun, verb and adjective. This is mostly a matter of historical accident: an example of the “ethnocentrism” (Haspelmath 2012) that has often haunted the study of word class universals. Had typology started from the point of view of Austroasiatic or Bantu, it is likely that ideophones would have been among the classes recognized as major, and scholars would have tied themselves into knots over questions like productive reduplication in Aslian expressives, the verb-ideophone distinction in Southern Bantu, and the dearth of depictive vocabulary in Indo-European.

The solution is not to elevate ideophones to the pantheon of major word classes and call it a day. Instead, ideophones are best seen as an enduring reminder of the path-dependence of typological inquiry and the need to take linguistic diversity seriously. This path-dependence surfaces in at least two ways. First, starting points shape routes

and destinations: if a particular set of concepts is handed down from earlier work, or happens to have proven useful for the first bunch of languages looked at, it is likely to become entrenched, making later-discovered phenomena seem more exotic or exceptional. Ideophones help us shake off such unwarranted assumptions to some degree because even if we can make do with noun, verb, and adjective in Standard Average European languages, classes of lexicalised vocal depictions are simply too big to be treated as marginal in, say, Bantu or Austroasiatic.

Second, terminological choices have a tendency to become reified and turn from attention-guiding hypotheses into attention-narrowing assumptions (Croft 2001). Research questions can easily devolve from exploring and explaining diversity into box-ticking exercises like “does this language have category X?”. Work on ideophones has largely been spared this kind of exercise, in part because it has always shown a healthy resistance to pigeon-holing (Newman 1968; Heath 2019; Dingemanse 2019), and perhaps also because the prolific research traditions of Japanese and South-East Asian linguistics maintain their own terms ‘mimetics’ (Iwasaki et al. 2017) and ‘expressives’ (Diffloth 2020). Terminological diversity can be confusing, but in this case it is also a sign of the robustness of the phenomenon: we know there is something here precisely because several research traditions have independently identified, in unrelated phyla, an open lexical class of marked words depictive of sensory imagery. Amidst the diversity, there is enough convergence in structural and morphosyntactic properties to warrant a common term like ‘ideophones’, if only to draw attention to typological explanations and generalizations (Akita & Pardeshi 2019; Dingemanse 2019). Typology always has to walk the fine line between charting linguistic diversity and achieving comparability, and ideophones provide us with exactly the right amount of recalcitrance to keep us on our toes.

Recent years have seen a number of wide-ranging reviews and comparative studies. For a more complete picture of ideophones, the reader is referred to work on the semantic typology of ideophones (McLean 2020; Nuckolls 2019); on the typology and morphosyntax of depiction marking (Güldemann 2008; Akita 2020); and on the notion of “ideophone” as a comparative concept that can inform typological work without losing sight of diversity (Dingemanse 2019; Ibarretxe-Antuñano 2017). Rather than rehash findings from this work, here I have made an effort to highlight matters that have received less attention and are most relevant to the treatment of ideophones in the context of word classes: the distinction between ideophones and interjections, the delicate balance between cross-linguistic commonalities and language-specific peculiarities, and the place of ideophones among other word classes.

Overlooking the themes highlighted here, one thing is abundantly clear: we need more high quality descriptions of the form, meaning and use of ideophones in a wide array of languages. Their treatment in grammar-writing is still erratic and too often confined to some pages lumping together “minor” word classes. A model of grammar

that devotes more pages to comparatives and superlatives than to ideophones and interjections perpetuates a most peculiar view of language structure. Fortunately the last decades have seen an increase in work that treats ideophones in considerable detail, both in individual studies (Beck 2008; Ibarretxe-Antuñano 2017; Lahaussais 2018; Nuckolls 2019; Heath 2019) and in grammatical descriptions (Newman 2000; Nikolaeva & Tolskaya 2001; Kruspe 2004; Yliniemi 2019; Veikho 2019; Rüscher 2020). Equipped with a sketch of the morphosyntactic terrain in which ideophones find their place, and with a clearer view of the central roles played by depictive vocabulary in modification and predication, we are now in a position to appreciate new horizons in grammar writing, typology, and theoretical linguistics. Or to give the last word to a Siwu ideophone, the future is bright, *waːj*→

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