Testing hypotheses about African ideophones in the field¹

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1. Hypotheses

The following set of twenty-two hypotheses are being presented as guide for research on ideophones in the field.

*1.01 Ideophones are collectable.*²

Although we assume that the ease of collecting a corpus of ideophones will vary in different parts of the world and even in Africa (see [02]), I can suggest for natural languages in Africa at least a few procedures I have found useful. For special cases, see the last hypothesis. (1) One can begin by tape-recording traditional tales, relations of life-threatening experiences, descriptions of landscape, etc. (see [22]). Since almost every predication, it seems to me, can contain an ideophone, I had traditional tales ad libbed in the following manner. Here I quote from a letter:

What I instructed the three men to do (there were four men, but the original story-tellers did not ad lib on their own stories) was to add [ideophones] wherever they thought they were appropriate. This was done by playing the original recording on one tape-recorder and having the informant push the pause button whenever he wanted to say something. It was beautiful the way they managed this procedure. There was no hesitation and groping for words. They put themselves into the work as if they were really a part of an audience (in spite of the fact that they were facing a microphone [that was] set on the table within a suitcase partly opened on its end and covered by a blanket [to improve the quality of the recording]). The first participant gave me almost nothing but ideophones, but the others couldn't help but play a more realistic part, so they uttered phrases and sentences, some of them containing ideophones, and some of them not.³

(2) If ideophones are used in insults, as they are in Gbeya (Samarin 1969), subjects can be asked to insult each other in play; or individuals, stimulated by photographs, can be asked to make injurious remarks in private.⁴ (3) Having extracted ideophones from these texts, one can use them to elicit others that might be used in the same contexts ("In the story he said [...]. Could you use another word?"). Naturally, the larger the number of trained assistants, the larger would be the corpus. (4) In some languages subjects can simply be asked to provide words that are similar to a sample. I found no difficulties with this technique among the Gbeya (see below). (5) A variety of protocols can also be used for eliciting data. One could also focus in one questionnaire on a few areas of meaning: e.g., shortness, heaviness, redness. Assistants can be used in collecting a great amount of data, but unless they are exceedingly well-trained one should not expect them to record exceptional spontaneous information.⁵ Thus, on one occasion when I was interviewing a young man, I was given *huk huk* in a sentence describing vomiting. A woman standing by said that a dog would vomit in this way; a

person would vomit *hŃk hŃk*. And since by-standers are sometimes responsible for the word that one writes down, assistants will have to be taught to make notations as to the source of a particular word. In the case of this subject, for example, the female bystander jumped in three times before the young man responded, and another young man once in this single interview.

1.02. The ease in collecting ideophones varies from language area to language area.

This is a cautionary hypothesis based on what we know about how different African languages are—even, sometimes, languages in the same closely-related group.

1.03. Children acquire ideophones at the same time that they acquire other words in their language.

According to this hypothesis, ideophones constitute no challenge to the language-acquisition competence of children for phonological, grammatical, or semantic reasons. I once observed the use of an ideophonic word by a child hardly two years old. A single word, it was the only thing the child said to her mother at my side. When the latter smiled, I asked what the girl wanted. Apparently hungry, she wanted some pumpkin that was being cooked. The word, as I recall, was not part of the repertoire of another adult, but it was both phonologically and semantically similar. This anecdote would suggest that the child had learned something about the formal nature of ideophones and perhaps the productive process that allows adult speakers to ‘play’ with these words in some way or another.⁶

On one occasion I gathered about twenty young children (between the ages of three and five, I would guess), dismissing others whose age disqualified them. Promising the children candy for playing a game with me, I had them sit in a circle and told them I wanted from each one a word like X, Y, Z, uttering in isolation what I thought were some common ideophones of various phonological types. It was important for the game, I told them, that each person give a different word. The thirty or so ideophones tape-recorded on this occasion were transcribed and submitted to some adults for judgement without their knowing the way in which they had been collected. (In other words, I deliberately concealed their origin.) Every one of the words turned out being an authentic ideophone.⁷

1.04. Women and men differ in their knowledge and use of ideophones.

I never undertook to test this hypothesis in a rigorous way. Part of the reason is that working with females was difficult: adolescent girls, both rural and urban, were shy, and women were generally preoccupied with chores and children. However, I was happy to learn that women, who tell their children traditional tales (and possibly even more frequently than their husbands), used ideophones richly in their narratives. An analysis of my questionnaire data might reveal some differences.

One relatively easy means of studying variation with gender and age as independent variables is to obtain recordings of the same traditional tale from different subjects.

1.05. Urbanized speakers of a language have a poorer inventory of ideophones than their more traditional co-ethnics and use ideophones less competently.

Some such hypothesis is justified even though the definition of ‘urbanized’ might be

problematic. What I have in mind is, first, the kind of person who acquired his or her ethnic language in a rural village, but then has lived mostly in a city where the individual uses the ethnic language less frequently than the city's lingua franca—Sango, in the case of Bangui. The ethnic language of such a person might be faultless in grammar, but deficient in lexicon—and especially in ideophones (see also Childs 1994, 1996). This is a reasonable hypothesis, and it is confirmed by my own observations. Indeed, I believe that the hypothesis will be supported by an analysis of some of the data collected from Gbeya who had lived in Bangui for some time and had been well educated. Further evidence is the Nigerian speaker of Yoruba who was the informant in a course in field linguistics at the University of Toronto. Every attempt I made to elicit ideophones from him was in vain until he exclaimed, “Oh, you mean those slang terms!” He then recalled having used them in primary school. — The issue with which we are concerned here is something like language death: because of personal history, some people become less competent linguistically than their co-ethnics. It should be understood that urbanization in itself is not an overwhelming independent variable. Language maintenance is possible even in a city.

06. Ideophones are vulnerable to attrition to a degree greater than any other part of a language's lexicon in situations of rapid change, such as pidginization.

Therefore, eliciting ideophones in pidgins—such as Sango—may be more difficult if for no other reason than that they are not as ubiquitous as they are in, say, Gbaya. In Sango there are very few of them (see Samarin 1967a, 1979). I would say that most of the alleged ideophones in Sango are spurious or limited in knowledge and use. From others one might get a different impression. M. Diki-Kidiri, for example, has claimed that there were at least thirty in Sango (personal communication, ca. 1977). In putting this claim to test by examining his recent dictionary (1998), in which they are classified as adverbs, I found forty-two of them (forty-one, since two are variants), of which only six are familiar to me.⁸ All of his words were checked against the dictionary compiled by Bouquiaux et al. (1978); Diki-Kidiri was one of the three collaborators. Nineteen of these words are not in this work; twelve others are described as *being* (not *derived* from) words in “sango riverain” (i.e., the ethnic river-language, NOT pidgin Sango)—of which three are said to be ideophonic, the others just adverbs or adjectives or both adverbs *and* adjectives; only the remaining ten are alleged to be authentic Sango words, BUT ONLY FOUR OF THESE IDEOPHONIC, the others being considered either adjectives or adverbs, or both.

1.07. The phonological shapes of ideophones associated with a certain meaning are similar to some degree.

It was found, for example, that many of the adverbs that collocated with *gbî* ‘be red’ had high tones: e.g., *kpér kpér*, *kpéréré*, *kélÛ kélu*, *kétÛ kitÛ*, *ngbÖké ngbÖké*.⁹ One subject judged all these words appropriate for a ripe *tîñḐ* (*Solanum Snoussii* A. Chev., “grosses baies jaunes”). And among the thirteen words obtained for the sentence ‘A *zozo*’s tail is not long, so it’s ...’ most of them contained the vowel /u/: thus, *nguturu*, *nduturi*, *ndùtùré*, *ngutu kuru*, *ngùtù kùrù*, *ndùsù.Àù*, *ndususù*, *nduturu*, *ndùtùrù*. Of twenty-seven persons interviewed, nine of them gave *nduturi* in this sentence. The reason for sound-form continuities in banks of words is dealt with in the next hypothesis.

1.08. Ideophones linked with a given essence of meaning increase in number by natural evolution.

In some instances variant forms can be explained by a rule that reduplicated forms can occur in another form while still showing reduplication. Thus, *kpéréré*, cited above, may be derived from *kpér kpér*, or vice versa, of course. The pair *kélÛ kéÛ* and *kétÛ kitÛ* also seem to be related, but not so easily accounted for.

1.09. Ideophones, like other words in a language, can be borrowed from other dialects of a language, from other co-territorial languages, and from foreign languages.

There would not appear to be any constraint on borrowing other than that borrowers recognize ideophony in the form and meaning of the borrowed words (Childs 1988). It is quite probable that some French and English words have become ideophones in African languages. French *depuis* in a number of languages means ‘a long time ago.’ In Sango it is pronounced *dîpî*, but it is modified in an exaggerated manner, for example, by increasing the length of the final vowels to mean ‘a very, very long time ago.’

1.10. Reduplication in some ideophones is inherent in their canonical (i.e., dictionary) form; it is otherwise an artifact of the use of language.

Sometimes nonlinguistic expressive features may suggest that reduplication also is being used expressively. Only by taking each word one-by-one can we arrive at the canonical form.

1.11. Ideophones vary intersubjectively in a manner that resembles geolinguistic variation.

This means that even when the contexts for the use of an ideophone are well defined—as with a color chip, for example—a number of different words will be given by subjects native to a particular village.¹⁰ If this hypothesis is valid, one cannot be allowed to give meanings or examples based on what one or two speakers of the language say. This is one place where many opinions must be obtained if the aim is a representative dictionary of ideophones. (On variation see Samarin 1971, 1972, 1991; Childs 1998.)

1.12. The use of ideophones is constrained by stylistic factors.

I tested this hypothesis in 1966—believing that in an effort to tell a story ‘simply’ the narrator will delete some information and will also be less concerned with performance—by having different subjects recount a traditional tale to an imaginary person who was learning Gbeya. My notes also record the following possible experiments:

1. Using different informants, get several to dictate a text [tale] sentence by sentence.¹¹
2. Have some informants start with dictating [a text] and switch to tape-recorded narration.
3. Have others start with non-interrupted narration and switch to dictated [narration].
4. Have others give uninterrupted narration.
5. Have informants shorten a text to see if they leave out ideophones.

1.13. Ideophones contribute meaningfully to an utterance.

This means that they do not merely add affect. Like all words of ‘quality’ they specify the very nature of an object, event, phenomenon, etc.: that is, they add meaning. (Whereas I have never made a claim to this effect, it is implied in Samarin 1967b and Samarin 1974. See the paper in this collection by Philip Noss.)

1.14. Ideophones belong to the lexicon of a language.

This, a corollary of the preceding, means (1) that they are liable to description as any other word in the language and (2) that they do not belong to individuals or small groups of individuals, but to a whole speech community. This does not mean, however, that they are invariant in form or use, or both form and use; nor does it mean that there is no intersubjective variation.

1.15. Ideophones are definable in a lexicographic manner.

(On early attempts to address this topic see Samarin 1967b). It is here assumed that if there are enough examples of the use of an ideophone in different linguistic contexts, one will be able to give it a dictionary meaning. It follows that definitions are only as good as the richness and variety of the attestations. I suspect, in any case, that some ideophones have a greater range of meaning than others. I found some ideophones, like *zólóló*, quite specific in meaning: This one means ‘pure white’ (like a newly washed white shirt). Also, for the sentence ‘The [piece of] paper is not wide, so it’s ...’ seventy-two percent of the subjects gave *pÉlÉm pÉlÉm*, although two other words were quite similar phonologically (i.e., *pÖlÖm* and *pÉlÉÁ*). For the sentence ‘His neck is not big [*zì*], so it’s ...’ there was even greater agreement by virtue of the fact that only four ideophones were given, all with high tone: *péré wéré* (70.3 percent) and *térééré* (22.2 percent).

By context is meant both ‘immediate linguistic context’ and general context. In Gbeya, for example, certain ideophones collocate with certain verbs. The word *zölölö*, for example, would occur with the verb *flÁ* ‘to be clean, white.’ Here are two interviewing protocols that I used.

1. *Sentence-completion protocol.* The subject is required to supply an ideophone at the point where one stops in reading a sentence, both affirmative (1) and negative (2). Thus, in (1) the subject might say *bÜÁ*:

- (1) *wesæ* *dÖ-Ü* *go bÜ nu* ____
sun burn-SFX so seize earth ____
‘The sun is shining so brightly that the earth is hot ____’

- (2) *te-é* *gan tÜn* *nÜ, go Ö* ____.
tree-DET NEG be-straight NEG, so be ____
‘The tree (or stick) is not straight, so it is ____.’

Since it follows that if a stick is not straight, it is bent: in this way one elicits contrastive ideophones. One would therefore be given appropriate words for ‘bent’ in describing such an object. One of these is *gÖÁilÖ*, which collocates with the verb *bii* / *bir*-[morphological variants] ‘to bend.’ Having obtained different ideophones for this sentence, one could then check them by asking subjects “What thing is *gÖilÖ*?”

2. *Illustrative object.* The subject is asked to name an object which would be described in each of the sentences. Each sentence in this questionnaire would start with the phrase *ge mÖ ge* ‘what thing?’:

- (3) *ge mÖ ge a yöö wey sæsæsæ ge ndæ.*
 INT thing INT LINK stand fire sésésé INT CLT
 ‘What thing is hot sésésé?’

The purpose of this protocol was to arrive at some idea of semantic consensus, which is hypothesized with respect to the definability of ideophones. My notes include this query: “Starting with the definitions, what chances [are there] of getting the [same] ideophones?”

3. *Appropriateness test.* Having found a number of ideophones with similar meanings, one asks the subject if he or she would use each of them (read one by one from a list) in the sentence. The subject is encouraged to modify any ideophone that is not pronounced in exactly his or her manner. One might also include words that could not possibly be appropriate as a means of measuring the subject’s competence in performing the task¹².

- (4) *ÁoÃ-Ûa yým, ga Ü gù gÖÁÖ gÖÁÖ.*
 back-3SFX hurt, so 3S bend-over gÖÁÖ gÖÁÖ.
 ‘Her back hurts, so she bends over in a gÖÁÖ gÖÁÖ manner.’

It is also assumed that meanings are ‘extracted’ from words by comparing them in different contexts. It is quite possible, therefore, that whereas *zólóló* can be used when one wants to say ‘pure white’ (that is, it expresses that particular concept), its core meaning may have little or nothing to do with color. Perhaps BRILLIANCE is its semantic domain. Thus, for the word *kpír kpír*, which I had glossed as ‘red,’ I obtained eight different illustrative objects: *gbére* (*Aframomum sanguineum* K. Schum., whose fruit is yellow or red), *mìrì* (unidentified), *mángo*, corn tassel, corn, *kuro* (*Striga senegalensis* Bth., “les fleurs d’un beau rosé”), *sízo* (*Cucumis melo* L., var. *Agrestis* Naud.), *tomato*. (The botanical identifications are from Tisserant 1950.) If one is close to understanding the meaning of an ideophone, one will expect more agreement with respect to a certain object. In this instance, *gbére* was cited more frequently than anything else; the mango was next in frequency even though the variety of mango that is found in the Central African Republic never becomes fully red.¹³

It should go without saying that arriving at the semantic essence of an ideophone is not always easy. For example, one subject gave *nduturi* for both the sentence that read ‘The spear’s blade is not sharp, so it’s ...’ and for ‘The *zozo*’s tail is not long, so it’s ...’ But whereas both *nduturi* and *ndútúrí* were given by several subjects for the latter sentence, none gave *ndútúrí* for the first. The explanation may lie in the fact that high tone is frequently used with ideophones for small objects even though some ideophones are differentiated by tone alone.

There is no reason, of course, for assuming that arriving at a dictionary meaning for an ideophone SHOULD be easy. The naiveté of linguists who have not had previous lexicographic experience in their own languages should not be allowed to influence what we believe about ideophones. Therefore, one must be prepared to study a word with as many techniques as possible. For example, *kpírírí* was one of those words that I had glossed as ‘red.’ When I went back to my data, I found that it was cited for several different objects: viz., the surface of sorghum beer in one of its stages of preparation, blood, the sun, the wild fruit *gbére*, the fruit of the palm tree *Borassus aethiopum* Mart., the fruit of the *kóló* tree (possibly *Canthium venosum* Oliv.), mango fruit, *mbongo-duwa* (unidentified fruit), meat (subject pointing to a crimson object), *mìrì* (*Ximenia americana* L.), peanuts, *pindi* (unidentified), *gaga* (a certain pumpkin), guave fruit, *tInD* (*Solanum Snoussii* A. Chev., “grosses baies jaunes”), *tomato*, *zìÜ* (a certain tree). By

comparing uses, one would hope to differentiate, in this case, between different kinds of 'redness.' What frustrates the semantic analysis, however, is variation. On the other hand, this hypothesis is based on the presupposition that in all languages some kinds of words are more difficult (that is, require greater effort) to define than others. These words, I speculate, are 'quality' words—in Eugene A. Nida's typology (Nida & Taber 1974). The definer, of course, is any person most qualified for the task. The ideal person would be a fluent native speaker of the language sufficiently trained in linguistics for this task.

The following means were used to test this hypothesis. I employed two young men whom I had trained to write in Gbeya to provide illustrative sentences for all the ideophones I had collected. On a separate slip of paper they translated the sentence into Sango as best they could, Sango having hardly any ideophones at all. On a third slip of paper they provided antonyms and synonyms.¹⁴

1.16. Definitions of ideophones are replicable

(a corollary of the preceding). This means that a number of lexicographers will arrive at the same or very similar definitions on the basis of the same data. This is certainly what we would expect for other kinds of words in African languages and for all words in other languages.

Corollary to the preceding. Ideophones cannot be invented by an individual, contrasting with one in the affirmative:

Ideophones can be created by any member of a speech community.

I have been satisfied by my own research that the latter statement is not true. Of course, utterances resembling ideophones can presumably be created by all human beings. I have myself created some, like the occasion when I said "I feel X!" in trying to describe the terrible headache that was obliging me to spend the rest of the day in bed. My having to describe it by X reveals that it did not enter our private language, and I am not sure if I can even remember what it was: *knocky-wocky*, I think, because I recall having the idea that I was *knocked out* by pain. But when we say that ideophones can be created by an individual, we imply that the neologisms are remembered either by the creator or the interlocutor, or both of them, and that they become part of the ideophonic repertoire of a community of speakers, small or large. My argument is based on the restrictive definition of ideophones: they are words in the linguistic sense, not gestures.

1.17. Ideophones can be incorrectly or inappropriately used

(a corollary of the above). Thus *ngit* is 'short' for a tree stump. When applied to a short person, informants either laugh or say it can't be used in this way."¹⁵

1.18. In certain contexts there is variation in a range of meaning.

This means that whatever the stimulus might be, subjects will respond in different ways. I learned this from my first experiment. Subjects were to describe certain objects by touching or smelling them, and, in one instance, to describe a sound. For example, I had them rub their fingers over the fibers of a scrub-brush after I had showed them what they were to do, saying

at the same time, *am tUm mÖ nÖÖ, go Ö* __ (1SG touch thing this, so be) ‘I touch this thing, and it’s __.’ This object proved to have more stimuli than I imagined in my naiveté. All I could think of (without enough thinking, obviously) was that the surface of the fibers were rough, but they had other as well: e.g., sharp, scratchy, yielding to touch, dry, etc.

Assuming that in narrating ‘the same thing’ people would vary in the use of ideophones, I had a number of subjects relate one of the better known spider stories: ‘How islands were made.’ (The rather large Ouham [Waam] River flows through the Bossangoa *sous-préfecture*.) The data have not been analyzed.

I had planned on using another technique to study variation: I would provide the details of an exciting episode and have subjects relate it to different individuals: a Gbeya friend who hadn’t heard about it, a policeman or judge, an interpreter who would translate into French, and an interpreter who would be translating into Sango.¹⁶

1.19. Some ideophones are specific enough in meaning that it is possible to find for them synonyms and antonyms.

No rigorous definition of these appositive terms is necessary, since, it should be clearly understood, we are concerned here also with ascertaining the amount of semantic regularity—if not, indeed, structure—there is among ideophones.¹⁷ In my field work, the concept of ‘same’ and ‘opposite’ was explained without difficulty to assistants in 1966. The purpose on that occasion, however, was primarily to elicit more ideophones than I already had.

In 1972 I undertook a synonym-cycling analysis of the data that had been entered into a computer. Its purpose was to determine the extent to which ideophones could be related to each other as synonyms and antonyms. This would, I believed, be a delicate tool with which to test my hypothesis concerning the lexicographic nature of ideophones. Although a thorough study of the print-out has never been made, enough of the data have been examined to satisfy me that ideophones are conceived by native-speakers to be contrastive or complementary.¹⁸ Here, for example, is a summary of the analysis for *baÁa kara* ‘short, stout, fat,’ all of the glosses being those that were entered into the computer after I had studied the exemplifying sentences:

Synonyms:

<i>gbiÁi kiri</i>	‘large and fat, short and fat’
<i>dÑtÑng</i>	‘short (rope)’
<i>rÈÁÈÁ</i>	‘short’
<i>rÈÁÈk</i>	‘short’

Antonym:

<i>zÖÁÈÈ</i>	‘tall’
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For each of these words in turn were printed the synonyms and antonyms that had been given for them. What I expected was that if *B* was given as a synonym of *A*, I would find that the assistants would cite *A* as a synonym of *B*. Exactly this kind of cycling was found.¹⁹ For example, for *rÈÁÈng* ‘short’ there were these synonyms:

<i>ÁÈtÈ ngbÈng</i>	‘short, low’
<i>riÁing</i>	‘short and stout, stout and short’
<i>bÈÁÈm</i>	‘short’

rÈÁÈk ‘short’

Then antonyms were for the most part what one would expect. Thus:

γŌngÈÈ ‘long’
ndongboÃ ‘tall’

There were, however, some apparent aberrations, although the meanings are in some cases not distant from the expected ‘tall.’ Thus:

Ín Ín ‘pointed, sharp’
ngÖl ngÖl ‘pointed, long and pointed’
ngÉl ngÉl ‘thin, narrow, small’
mbÉl mbÉl ‘shiny, clean, white, wide, long, tall’

And when the words are cycled again, we find happily that some of the words are found again. Thus, since *rÈÁÈng* was cited as a synonym for *baÁa kara*, we would expect that the latter would be cited as a synonym for the former. This was indeed the case. And under *γŌngÈÈ* ‘long’ is found the expected *dÑtÑÃ* ‘short (rope).’

1.20. Some ideophones are marked, socio-culturally not linguistically, for evaluation.

The possibility that this might be true occurred to me on those occasions when people laughed when some ideophone was used. Moreover, in trying to understand the meaning of some ideophones I wondered if they might not mean ‘more’ or ‘less’ of X than might be expected or desired. I proceeded to devise a ‘Value Differential Test.’ This consisted of sentences which ended with either ‘therefore it’s good’ or ‘therefore it’s not good’ in response to which the subject was asked to name the object. For example:

- (5) *wÛ dÈ-Û mŌ - é lŌngŌfiyŌ, gö gan rŌk nÛ*
 3P do-SFX thing-DET lŌngŌfiyŌ, so NEG be-good NEG
 ‘They made the thing long, so it’s not good.’

The response from one person was, ‘When they make a spear’s shaft, and it’s too long.’ Other kinds of sentences, of course, could be used to elicit this kind of response. For example, my assistant suggested the following sentence:

- (6) *ge a rŌk nÛ go Ö lŌngŌfiyŌ, yín mŌ-é yege ndæ*
 INT LINK be-good NEG so be lŌngŌfiyŌ, name [of] thing-DET INT CLT
 ‘What [i.e., name something that] is not good in being lŌngŌfiyŌ?’

1.21. The meanings of onomatopoeic ideophones can be studied by the same means as other kinds of ideophones.

For a list of such ideophones the subjects were asked the question, ‘What things goes (*wée / wér-* [morphological variants] ‘to make a sound’)?

22. In some languages ideophones can be modified phonologically and morphologically for stylistic or expressive purposes.

In making this hypothesis one presupposes that it has already been agreed that ideophones in themselves do not have expressiveness as their sole or primary function. I maintain that in Gbeya at least expressiveness is a function added to the denotative one. I base this claim, first, on observation. By this I mean all my experience in living with Gbeya-speaking persons in all kinds of situations, but I have a tape-recording that alone would defend my claim. Standing at one particular spot that happened to be at the intersection of two paths, facing a garden plot, I asked people to describe what they saw. In plain, matter-of-fact language they enumerated them: “There’s peanuts piled up *X* [describing a pile] over there, which the owner has not yet collected”; “I see *T* [kind of] trees standing *Y* [tall] over there”; “I see corn that is not fully ripe, so it’s *Z* [green, unripe, soft].” Some persons saw more than others, all varied in what they saw, but they frequently used the same ideophones in describing what they saw—and they all behaved in a rather disinterested manner, puzzled, I suppose, by not knowing what I was really doing. — Tucker Childs takes a view opposite to my own and despite extensive correspondence (Childs 1990). Ideophones, he says, form a “linguistic category whose primary function is expressiveness.” This is their “unique character” (Childs, personal communication, November 1998). My views are found in Samarin 1970b, 1974, 1976, 1978.

In other situations, however, ideophones are indeed manipulated for expressivity. Although this manipulation was not formally studied by me, I can report that there are different patterned ways: for example, raising or lowering the height of the pitch above what might be normal in an utterance; reducing the height of the pitch of high tone in small degrees (in steps) over a stretch of syllables, as with the word *zólóló* in its normal or lengthened form); adding syllables to a word that already had reduplicated ones (*zólóló* > *zólólólóló* ‘white’); altering the dictionary-form of a complex ideophone (e.g., *ngalang* > *ngáláng ngalang ngáláng*); and others, not to speak of ways that are more difficult to describe, like changing timbre, using falsetto, and so forth.

The expressive use of ideophones is not beyond the limits of research techniques. The best means, of course, is to record instances in extemporaneous speech. Traditional tales again would be the best place to start. One could follow by having people engage in improvised skits in which the scenario leads to heightened emotions. And one can easily find subjects who have had life-threatening experiences (like my own with lions and elephants).²⁰

1.23. The use of ideophones varies according to the competence of the speakers of a language.

This is to be expected, because competence in the practice of language is variable in speech communities throughout the world. The richness of one’s vocabulary, the range of complexity of one’s sentence structures, the organization of one’s discourse, and many other features of THE USE OF LANGUAGE are known to us without study. There are people in our acquaintance whose conversation is interesting, others who have a gift in narration, and so on. It should be expected, therefore, that there would be variation in the use of ideophones. One of my Gbeya friends who helped me to learn his language hardly ever used them with me or in my presence, and he was also not a very good conversationalist. His blindness, with which he was stricken at the age of fourteen during a meningitis epidemic, may have handicapped him. But what about one woman who was asked to describe what she saw in a garden (see above)? She did not use a single ideophone. Whatever may be the explanation for differences between speakers, we are entitled to distinguish those who are creative, imaginative, and expressive from those who are not.

2. Conclusion

Although this is a rather modest and ad-hoc set of hypotheses, they will, I hope, lead to more attention being paid to hypotheses when investigators address themselves to ideophones.

Notes

1. My study of ideophones must have begun along while learning Gbeya, which I committed myself to on arriving in the *District de Bossangoa* in February 1954. (This is the pronunciation used by people in their own area, a variant of Gbaya. Elsewhere—in Bangui, for example—people, including natives of the area, might refer to the language as the Gbaya of Bossangoa.) Gbeya was the language I used most on a day-by-day basis from 1954 until February of 1960, leading to the publication of Samarin 1966. However, I practiced it during every one of my subsequent trips to the CAR: namely, 1962, 1966, 1972, 1988, 1991, 1992, and 1994. And I get to practice it on a monthly basis in Toronto with a Gbeya living here permanently. — It is a pleasure to acknowledge financial aid that helped me pursue my research on ideophones. (1) The National Science Foundation, U.S.A., ‘Correlates of expressive language in African ideophones,’ 1 July 1966 – 30 June 1967. (2) University of Toronto, Humanities and Social Sciences Committee of the Research Board, ‘The semantics of African ideophones,’ 1971–1972, with the assistance of Walter Berndt; (3) University of Toronto, Humanities and Social Sciences Committee of the Research Board, ‘Computer analysis of semantic consistency in Gbeya,’ 1 March 1975 – 30 April 1976. For a brief note on ‘Field procedures in ideophone research’ see Samarin 1970. — I am grateful to Philip Noss and Tucker Childs for comments and questions that led to both to clarification and enrichment.
2. This hypothesis does not imply another one: namely, that ideophones are universal. That must be explicitly stated as a testable hypothesis or explicitly rejected for one or more reasons. See below. Philip Noss (personal communication, 21 December 1998) expresses this view about elicitation: “I don’t know whether it is useful to draw so basic a research distinction as that between elicitation and observation ...” I do.
3. I found on one occasion that young boys were uninhibited around the hearth at night even when adults were present, but an adult whom I engaged refused to utter any insult in public, insisting on our going into a cotton shed and shutting the door.
4. 14 August 1966, Bata, letter to Henry Alan Gleason.
5. In the project I had planned for the summer of 1966 I was going to use “ten catechist-level field assistants” (i.e., men who were literate in Sango and had had a bit of religious education; twenty according to letter to Charles Taber, 14 August 1966) to collect words for me after training and “one full-time assistant (maybe *collège* trained)” (letter to Martin Garber [Bangui], 1 May 1966). What I needed were people who were already literate and able to write. At that time among the Gbeya these would have been Bible-school trained men literate in Sango. I would have to teach them to use the orthography I had devised for Gbeya. In the period 4 June – 14 August I had about forty candidates whom I tried to train, my success being about ten percent (14 August 1966, letter to Charles Taber). It turned out, in any case, that using assistants in the field may not have been a good idea. The “bright and trustworthy” young man I sent to work in the villages around Bossangoa was not taken seriously and accomplished little in two weeks (letter to Charles Taber).
6. Thanks to Philip Noss for inciting these remarks.
7. I draw these remarks from memory. In a letter (21. August, 1966, Bata, to Howard Law),

however, I wrote that I had used this technique with eight- to ten-year-old girls. However, because of the thirty or so younger children who surrounded us in the village, I took boys into our house. The novel environment awed them into good behavior but did not prevent them from ejaculating ideophones, one after another.

8. My knowledge of Sango is, of course, that of an expatriate, but it is also that of a linguist who has recorded and studied extemporaneous speech of the kind that in ethnic languages would be rich in ideophones.

9. The orthography here differs slightly from the one used in Samarin 1966, because I subsequently concluded that nasal consonants and pre-nasalized stops are in complementary distribution, the former occurring with nasalized vowels and the latter with oral vowels, but in this paper they are written as if separate phonemes; it was also found that pre-glottalized nasals [ṁ] and [ṇ] occur before nasalized vowels whereas the implosive stops [ɓ] and [ɗ] before oral vowels. The sequence *ngm* represents a bilabial-velar nasal. In Gbeya the vowels of ideophones are either all oral or all nasalized and the tones either all high (marked) or all low. Short and long vowels are phonemically distinct. — I will not address myself to the question as to how ideophones should be written. It is seen from my examples that I prefer to write complex and reduplicated ideophones as a sequence of two words: i.e., neither solid nor with a hyphen—*kétŭ kétŭ* (a single word) and *gbiÁi kiri*. I have no principled justification for my convention and could possibly be convinced to use another one. In Gbeya the vowels of a word are either all nasalized or all oral. In ideophones, in addition, all tones are either high or low. —

Abbreviations used for the examples are the following: 3S, third person singular pronoun; 3SFX, third person singular pronominal suffix; CLT, clitic; DET, determiner; INT, interrogative; LINK, linking particle; NEG, negator; SFX, perfective suffix.

10. “Some people use *ngbŌÁŌ kŌrŌ* and *ngbiÁi kéri* for a short person with apparently the same meaning, some accept one and not the other, and some say that there is a difference of meaning. But do [both of] these words belong in their speech? Sometimes I get very clear evidence of recognition [of an ideophone in the questionnaire]; ... but in giving the example there will be a change of pronunciation: e.g., *ngbŌÁŌng* is replaced by *ngmüÁüing* [the causative difference being in nasalization]” (14 August 1966, to Henry Alan Gleason.).

11. This was done with one story in 1966. Even the dictated narrations had ideophones.

12. I had one such protocol with instructions to assistants in Sango and another for a different sentence with instructions to assistants in French: “Demander quels adverbes parmi les suivants s’attachent mieux à la phrase donnée. On cherche à établir la convenabilité de ces adverbes à la phrase. Mettre X devant les adverbes qui NE SONT PAS appréciés par la personne interviewée.”

13. To maintain some control over the range of objects that might be named I asked subjects to name things that they might find in the rural areas. If one were working with city-dwellers, one might not want to make this requirement. In any case, constraints have to be carefully chosen. It would be interesting, incidentally, to learn what objects and experiences in cities are used to illustrate ideophones.

14. “I figure that if I can get four or five different illustrative sentences I will have a better-than-50 percent chance of determining the meanings. Defining must come later on. I’m having enough trouble just getting the illustrative sentences” (14 August 1966, Bata, letter to Charles Taber).

15. 14 August 1966, letter to Henry Alan Gleason, Noss agrees (personal communication, 21 December 1998) that “ideophones can be used incorrectly or inappropriately, but this is the artist’s game!” He points out (but here I state in my own words) that they lend themselves to creative use, and this possibility lies in what ideophones connote; their use can be metaphorical. The point is developed in his paper in this collection.

16. A man SNEAKS UP and enters a house. He is seen by a woman, who SCREAMS. The man RUNS OUT. He FALLS, injuring his nose; it BLEEDS. Several men RUN UP and SEIZE him.

17. In other words, our aim is not to arrive at an understanding that would justify a dictionary label of 'synonym' or 'antonym.' Indeed, I would claim that this would be impossible. In field work we are concerned primarily with (1) collecting data and (2) organizing them provisionally. Ideally, a thorough analysis of one's corpus of ideophones would (or could) result in a semantic grouping.

18. One is justified in demurring by saying that a certain amount of consistency would be expected from a person providing synonyms and antonyms. That is, if he cites *B* as a synonym for *A*, when he gets around to providing an example of *B*, he will cite *A* as a synonym. Although this may indeed have happened in some instances, I do not think that, since there were three men involved and since this work went on for several weeks, all of the consistency can be explained in this manner.

19. The word *gloss* might, however, be inappropriate. Since my goal was to arrive at a rigorous dictionary of Gbeya ideophones, these 'glosses' were more like semantic clues that I drew from the data as I sat before the card-punching machine.

20. When I recount these events in Gbeya, I ask someone to ad lib ideophones wherever they can be used to prevent my narrative from being flat and banal. The performance thereby becomes more dramatic.

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