

DETERMINING THE MEANINGS OF IDEOPHONES*

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Nothing demonstrates the need for better lexicographic methods in African linguistics than does the attempt to define the ideophones of these languages. Here we see very clearly that whereas ad hoc definitions are easy to fabricate, it is difficult to determine what distinguishes one ideophone semantically from another. Contrastive meaning is not inferable from most definitions. Take the one for Kikuyu ɔɔɔ (from Benson 1964): "desc[riptive] of the sound of grunt of pig, mole, etc." Its limitations are seen when we seek answers for several questions. Is this the only ideophone which describes this sound? Is ɔɔɔ the only way pigs grunt? A more important question is this: In the repertoire of sounds – or just animal or human sounds – what is there distinctive in ɔɔɔ? An entry of this type can more properly be designated as a 'documentation' than a definition: i.e. it seems to say, "If you want proof that ɔɔɔ occurs in the language, elicit for the concept 'grunt of a pig.'" In this area we foreigners are premature in our defining. We have allowed pragmatic factors in field study to determine the nature and content of our dictionaries. These works, admittedly, have in general been few and rather sketchy: timid ventures into sketching the semantic domains of the languages we have studied; practical guides to the learning of these languages; but usually just the somewhat edited field notes which resulted from our grammatical analysis and text translation. Much more sophistication is needed in African lexicography. This is the prerequisite to the publication of future dictionaries, regardless of how desperately we need them. But the path to better dictionaries is going to be a difficult one.

Lexicographic techniques are in principle well known to us, at least for written languages. We (1) select a representative sample of the language, (2) take citations – with adequate context – for all the words being studied and (3) infer the meaning on the basis of their use in all occurrences. This having been done we then (4) compare these words with all other similar ones to determine the precise nature of their complementation and contrast (Weinreich 1964). This fourth step is essential: without it we cannot know how two synonymous words differ.

These steps to defining are based on two requirements: the first is an abundance of data on each word, preferably in as many different kinds of contexts as possible; the second is the native speaker's knowledge of the language. The first requirement is not likely to be met in Africa, both because there is generally not enough written material in African languages and because when the literature exists, there appears to be less use of ideophones (say, in dialogue) than is usual in speech.¹ But even if there were copious citations of ideo-

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¹ I would imagine that even in plays written in the African languages, such as the one that was produced at Aŋɔ in Ghana in 1962 (ŋA ŋI ɔŋŋIE by Dr. Fiwoo), there are few ideophones, that is, in the script. As I observed the play, however, I detected the use of many of them. It would be an interesting study to compare the two discourses with ideophones in mind so as to determine, among other things, in what circumstances the actors ad libbed by adding ideophones to the prepared script (It should be added that this remarkable play was done in the best of European traditions with no one reading his part.)

phones in the best lexicographic tradition, it is unlikely that we could infer from them definitions which would have the same probability of generality that other words have. This is why we must have explanations from the native speakers, (I state this as an assumption. What we need are experiments to test the 'definability' of ideophones purely from contextual material.) We can ask our informants to give us as many different uses of ideophones as they can. But this technique has its own danger. It is this: there is some kind of limit to the number of different contexts and uses which a human can recall for any word in his language. At any point in time a person finds himself in a 'set of associations' from which he can be extricated only by new stimuli. It is not likely, therefore, that we will get anywhere near the range which is possible in the language, although it remains to be seen how different informants can be used to complement each other.

For the present, and for a few more years, the requirements for proper lexicography will not be met in Africa. Most Africanists today are working on languages which are not native to them, and they do not have the resources to properly process a half-million or so words. For a while longer, therefore, dictionaries will continue to be FIELD DICTIONARIES. But this is no reason why they should not be good ones.

How does the field linguist go about his work? My own experience in trying to determine the meaning of the Kikuyu ideophone *ba* will illustrate the usual procedure. While studying the meaning of some words which seem to relate to jumping or leaping, I decide to elicit an ideophone which describes a single fall. I describe a dove sitting on a limb which falls when it is hit with a bullet. The informant responds with *erááǵá ǵǵ ba*. This he accompanies with a gesture made with his open palm, facing himself, brought rapidly and forcefully down from his face to waist (as he sits in front of me). I write down 'It came down in a swift motion.' But when I ask for the names of other objects which can fall down *ba* I get 'leaves, handkerchiefs, sheets of galvanised iron falling from roof tops.' Obviously my definition 'in a swift motion' was not adequate. I am further perplexed by the volunteered information that when a book falls down flat it does *ba*, but when it falls on its edge it goes *ca?* At this point only an inexperienced field worker would be satisfied with his guess at the meaning of *ba*. It does not help to leave the decision to the reader of the dictionary with the information that *ba* occurs with falling (e.g. handkerchiefs, leaves, galvanised iron sheets and flat books)! Ideophones, of course, constitute a special problem because of the specificity of their meaning,² but this example adequately illustrates how immediate context is used by the field linguist for inferring meaning. Errors resulting from such 'snap judgments' are probably to be found in all our field notes and published dictionaries - if only we had a technique for ferreting them out.

There are ways to reduce the amount of error, that is, of coming closer to the semantic distinction which the language itself makes, not one which owes its existence to the accidents of context, linguistic or not, or previous experience on the part of the field worker. I suggest two techniques with which I have been experimenting in a desire to achieve greater precision in defining ideophones, but we might first review the common ones.

(a) We check our ad hoc definition with the informant. We do this either in an intermediate language or the language being studied, in both instances using a paraphrase with

² One of the best-known illustrations of ideophone specificity is furnished by Westermann for Ewe. He gives 37 'picture word' adverbs which go with the verb Ɔ 'to walk': e.g. *béhebehe* 'describes the slouch of a weak man', *bɔhɔbɔhɔ* 'describes the heavy walk of a fat man', *bólabula* 'describes walking without looking where one is going', etc. (1930: 107-108).

equivalent semantic content. The difficulty here is that the informant is sometimes less competent than we are to make a judgment on the nuclear meaning of a term. His 'conceptual hypostatizations' (as K. L. Pike calls them) are accidental, based on his personal experience and what he can remember. If he approves, he may be doing so only because of the appropriateness of the definitions to the recorded utterance(s) in which it occurs.³

(b) We elicit information about the use of the word in other contexts, either by asking the informant to provide the examples or by suggesting them ourselves. In field work this takes the form of the "Twenty Question Game": is it a living object? (if it is a living object) where does it live - on land, in the water or in the air? is it large enough for humans to see? etc.⁴ In trying to define the Kikuyu ideophone *ɲaji* which occurred in the sentence *arāámúrumírɛ ɔ́ ɲaji* 'he bit him', I found that I had asked the following questions (and others may have escaped being recorded):

"Is this to bite with the teeth?" "Yes."

"Can one bite a thing *ɲaji*?" "No."

"Does it hurt?" "Yes."

"Does a person bite something off (e.g. a piece of banana)?" "No".

"Would *ɲaji* be used of a dog biting the wool of a sheep?" "No."

"Can a personal wound, sore, illness, etc. hurt *ɲaji*?" "No."

"Could it be used of a person's biting his tongue?" "Yes."

"His cheek?" "No."

"Can you tell a person to bite down on something *ɲaji*, as when a dentist instructs his patient?" "Yes."

"When a person is biting something, his teeth begin to pierce it. Would the word be used of someone stabbing another with a knife?" "No."

The difficulty with this technique is that the informant, important as he is in providing examples, cannot supply enough of them. As for the investigator, his questions will help him to 'home in' on the meaning only if he has a prior knowledge of the semantic categories represented in the language: e.g. are objects classified according to size or shape? does the language tend to distinguish various ways of carrying things? With ideophones this technique is inadequate, because we do not yet know what are the fundamental categories contrasted by these words.

Two other techniques have been used by myself in the study of ideophones: (c) and (d) improve on (a) and (b) respectively. They are being suggested not because they are novel, for analogous procedures have been used by field linguists generally, but because they have probably never (or never seriously) been applied to determining the semantic ranges of these words. Even with me they are still being used experimentally. Here it must be said that we desperately need a whole battery of procedures which will enable literate and partly trained informants to contribute basic data on the basis of which linguists and other

³ The participation of the informant in field lexicography should, of course, never be restricted. What we need, however, is greater specification of the nature of this participation. The question is: How can an unsophisticated informant be trained to contribute to word-defining? Werner (1965) in a paper which contributes much to our general subject, mentions a 'participant informant technique' (where his informant acted as a 'participant consultant') about which we should like to learn more.

⁴ This 'yes/no' technique is fundamentally the same as Landar's matrixized method of eliciting permitted topic-comment constructions in Navaho (1960) consisting of noun-like words and verbs: e.g. that 'blood' could occur with 'it is slippery', 'it is dirty, filthy, awful', and 'it is cold' but not with 'it is soft, fluffy, limp' or 'it is wide, broad'.

skilled persons can arrive at more precise meanings than we have been accustomed to. It is not only the inadequacy of past work which makes this need imperious; it is also the magnitude of the task before us. There are probably several thousand ideophones in each African language (I mean at least the Congo-Kordofanian ones but also Nilo-Saharan and probably Chadic). Before ideophones can be used in semantic and psychological research their meanings must be well understood.

(c) The first procedure which my study suggests is PARAPHRASING. The limited use I have had with it indicates that it may be the best way for getting the initial data on the meanings of ideophones. This should not be surprising. The function of paraphrasing as a technique for intralingual 'translation' has been known for some time. But it was Paul Garvin's inductive method in semantic analysis¹ (unpublished manuscript) which first suggested to me its utility in the analysis of ideophones. It is being applied to the study of Kikuyu ideophones (taken from Benson's dictionary) with the assistance of Mr. Peter Kamũyũ. The instructions are simply to provide an illustration of the use of the ideophone, paraphrase the ideophone in another Kikuyu sentence and then translate the two sentences into English. The following are a few examples:

- 1a aráákóroriré ñongo ɔ́ ɔ́ro 'she cleaned the pot completely'
 1b aráákóroriré irio cide déne wá ñongo 'she took all the food remains in the pot'
 2a ñgɛɛgɛré eráágambá ɔ́ ɔ́ro 'the bell is ringing . . .'
 2b mogambó wáá ñgɛɛgɛré wáre moreto 'the sound of the bell was heavy'
 3a twaná torárogá ceɛe ceɛe 'the children are jumping . . .'
 3b twaná torároga naiguró maita máigge 'the children jump several times'

The value of this procedure, it seems to me, is that it requires the native speaker to be specific in his discussion of the meanings. In the second set of sentences, for example, the word *moreto* 'heavy' clearly identifies the bell as a low-sounding one. (Benson defines it as "sound of a deep-noted ox-bell", identical with the meaning we derived from the very first paraphrase of sentence 1a.) The paraphrase therefore eliminated the necessity of our having to ask questions such as: "What kind of bell was it?" "How large was it?" "Was it near at hand?" etc. This procedure will, of course, not do all our work for us. There can be no paraphrase for all the possible uses of an ideophone, only for each sentence in which one occurs.

(d) The second procedure which my study suggests might be called 'the multiplication of synonyms'. It includes two steps: (i) for each ideophone in a given specific context the investigator seeks to obtain as many other words of similar meanings as he can. (It goes without saying that antonyms are equally instructive.) He can do this with a single speaker, whether he be the original one or someone else, or with several speakers. What must remain constant, however, is the original utterance. For some utterances it will be important to make the extra-linguistic context explicit also. The next step (ii) is to ask for other utterances in which these 'synonyms' could be used. It is illustrated below. To increase variety in the utterances it is better to use an informant different from the original one.

The value of this procedure became apparent some time ago when I sought to ascertain the amount of diversity which characterized ideophones for a set of 10 concepts in the Gbaya-Ngbaka-Manza languages of the Central African Republic. These were: light (in weight), heavy, smooth and furry (using a powder puff), rough, rattling sound, black, white, soft, long and round. I found that wherever I had more than one informant I obtained several different ideophones. From a group of Gbanu at Bossembele, for example, I obtained 9 words for 'black' (describing a piece of charcoal): *flyé flyé, dóróró,*

ṣ̀nṣ̀rṣ̀, kārē kārē, ndii ndii, gbókí gbókí, káwáj káwáj, kíwó kíwó, ndíngbé ndíngbé. There were also 18 different words which I would have glossed as 'rough', all from Gbeya.⁵ None of the speakers identified any of them as being dialectal within this language. The words were elicited in response to my question *tám mɔ nɔ go ɔ ré ge ndé* 'Touch this thing, so how is it?' (All of the survey was conducted in the Gbeya language.) The object which each participant was asked to touch was the surface of a European-manufactured scrub-brush 16 × 4 × 3.5 cm in size. After the words were obtained, a single informant was asked of each word: *ɔma mɔ ne 5 . . . 5 né ge mɔ ɔ ge ndé* 'Something which is . . . is what thing?' (i.e. 'Name an object which has this quality.')

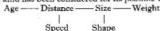
In the following list, additional illustrative objects were provided by different informants.

Some Gbeya Ideophones Descriptive of the Surface of a Brush

1. *rēṣ̀neṣ̀ne*: new grass which has just come up and is still short
 2. *harara*: the feeling of something crawling over one's body or of grass being swallowed with food
 3. *rīt rīt*: the skin of a kid not yet a month old - the hair is short and smooth
 4. *haka yaka*: leaf of pumpkin, sandpaper, back of crocodile
 5. *yaṣ̀a yaṣ̀a*: the collection of twigs and leaves on the back of certain insect, month-old growth of beard on a European
 6. *vūk sūṣ̀nu*: sorghum grain which has sprouted in the process of making beer, hair on the back of a wild pig, tangled sheep wool
 7. *veṣ̀em veṣ̀em*: itchy feeling after a certain pollen has fallen on one's body
 8. *ṣ̀ususu*: raised surface of a scratch on one's body
 9. *vakaka*: scattered hairs on a pig's body, upright sorghum stalks
 10. *raka raka*: surface of a file or rasp (*ráká*), snake skin, turtle shell
 11. *saka yaka*: dry sand
 12. *soko yoko*: dry sand, food sauce which does not contain a mucilagenous vegetable (e.g. okra)
 13. *vuṣ̀u vuṣ̀u*: the surface of a certain caterpillar whose body is covered with hair
 14. *kokot*: surface of a dried animal skin
 15. *goro ɓot*: short like an animal's head cut off at the base
 16. *kok soḍo*
 17. *sakaḍa*
 18. *tuk suḍu*
- } (Other uses for these words were not obtained.)

As a technique for ascertaining the meanings of ideophones with greater precision this one seems to have two merits. (1) It hinders ad hoc defining. Having learned that *soko yoko* can apply to a sauce that does not have a mucilagenous base, one finds it impossible to define it as 'rough, as of a brush' although it was used of a brush. (2) It also supplies

⁵ It is for this reason that they are tentatively called synonyms. Synonymy, if the word is going to be used at all, must be defined in terms of the language being studied. What has happened in my experiment is that subjects responded differently to the feel of a brush and classified their experience in terms of 18 different adverbs. See below. Further work is necessary to define the semantic intersection between concepts. That is, a term 'appropriate' (or so we assume at the moment) to one concept might have a closer valence to another one. There may, in fact, be networks of inter-relationships. The following kind has been considered for its possible value in discovery procedures:



I do not, however, see how Taste and Odour could be related to these except through a whole series of intermediate concepts.

clues to possible semantic groupings. In this list some words refer to rather rigid objects (no. 9) and other words refer to objects which are intertwined; some words seem to refer to roughness as irregularity in a plane (no. 4) and others to irregularity in texture (no. 12). Such a list of synonyms therefore provides several categories which can be used in matrixed checking. Thus, the following possible contrastive features are deduced from the present list: granular objects, upright fibres, solid surface, tangled fibres, uneven to the eye. But like the other procedures this one cannot be employed alone. It simply provides information which could not be as easily obtained in another way.

Multiple synonymy as here briefly described indicates the need for change in the way ideophones have hitherto been entered in dictionaries, i.e. in alphabetical order with practically no cross-indexing to others with similar semantic ranges. This procedure should be abandoned for thesaurus-like entries: all ideophones similar in meaning should be grouped under one of them (e.g. *haka yaka*, see *harara*; *raka raka*, see *harara*, etc.), where an attempt is made to explain the various overlapping and non-overlapping uses.

In addition to its contribution to better lexicographic methods with respect to ideophones, multiple synonymy leads to at least two significant observations. The first is that it is highly unlikely that people make up ideophones 'on the spot', as some have claimed (Innes 1964). It is not enough to rely on the statements of a few informants who professed not to have known the ideophones (as Innes, in a personal communication, explains). After all, no speaker of any language controls all of its vocabulary. Besides, in my interviewing of 30 or 40 Gbeya informants I found not one who was ignorant of any of the ideophones I obtained from other Gbeya. In a few instances there was disagreement on the appropriateness of a word, but here too we must expect people to differ in the way words are used. For example, after *ziboo* was contributed to describe a very heavy object, another speaker objected, saying that it could only be used of a large cluster of fruit. The second observation is that we must be very cautious about making statements like "There are 18 words for 'rough' in Gbeya." All that we now know is that there were 18 ways of describing the surface of a brush (see fn. 5). It seems apparent that the interviewees were impressed by different aspects of the brush. In the case of no. 1 the perception is syncretically transferred to the sense of sight. What we may have here is the overlapping of marginal areas of meaning, i.e. the sharing of semons of which *sememes* are composed. In terms of the semantic structure of Gbeya ideophones there may only be 5, 10 or 11 (or any other number of) *sememes*. In any case, it is completely erroneous to say that another language has N number of words for 'rough' or 'smooth', that is, words in our own language. What a statement like this can only mean is that in some contexts where one of our words could be used, N number of words from the other language could be employed.

In restricting our defining of ideophones to a few illustrative sentences, without the aid of multiple synonymy, we stand the risk of touching upon only the marginal or extended meanings of these words. When this is the case, it may not be possible to judge the accuracy of the meaning attributed to a word. But if a dictionary is a lexical inventory of a language, its definitions should be replicable to some reasonable degree. That is, given only the definition, there should be a better-than-50 per cent chance of getting the word in question; and conversely, given the word, we ought to be able to elicit the purported definition. I suspect that with ideophones we are far from the ideal.⁶ We can illustrate

⁶ Werner's article (1965) is interesting for its documentation of the rather high degree of non-replicability of Navaho medical terms in the existent dictionaries. For 110 items there was complete agreement with the source in 47 instances, disagreement about meaning in 35, and complete rejection in 28.

the problem by looking at the Kikuyu ideophone *ɲaɲi* which Benson defines as "descri[ptive] of the act of biting with a sharp click of the jaws." When the informant was given this definition, he responded with the word *ɲári* in the sentence *araárumírɛ roremé roaké ʃʃ ɲári* 'he bit his tongue . . .' After further discussion the informant avowed that *kírí* could be used, as in *araárumánírɛ mágégó mááké ʃʃ kírí* 'he bit his teeth . . .' with the explanation that "There is nothing in his mouth, he just clicked his teeth together." The most appropriate example would be that of a dog snapping futilely at flies. Even when he was given Benson's entry, i.e. *ɲaɲi*, the informant rejected it as inappropriate. Of course, by saying this we have not determined why the discrepancy exists.

Conclusion. In this study I have tried to indicate the shortcomings of our approach to the lexicography of African languages, using ideophones by way of example. I have not meant to imply, however, that all words have been as poorly treated as ideophones seem to have been. Moreover, although I have tried to suggest ways in which the semantics of ideophones could be better ascertained, I realize that they cannot be followed for all such words in the usual field dictionary. But ideophones merit independent investigation of a nature suggested in this paper.

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RÉSUMÉ

Les procédés lexicographiques généralement employés pour les langues africaines ont besoin d'être améliorés, surtout en ce qui concerne les idéophones. Il n'est guère possible d'employer les procédés traditionnels, car il manque des textes. De plus, les textes qui existent sont pauvres en idéophones, et il est aussi très difficile de déterminer le sens d'un idéophone simplement par les contextes. On peut se servir de deux techniques: (a) faire des définitions ad hoc qu'on vérifierait en interrogeant un informateur, mais l'expérience forcément limitée de l'informateur l'empêche de penser à tout ce qu'on voudrait savoir; (b) demander comment ces mots s'emploient dans d'autres contextes, suggérés soit par l'informateur, soit par le linguiste, mais il faudrait alors connaître à l'avance les catégories sémantiques fondamentales de la langue. Deux autres procédés sont à l'essai: (c) demander à l'informateur de fournir une autre phrase en sa langue ayant le même sens qu'une phrase donnée contenant l'idéophone en question, puis de traduire les deux phrases dans la langue de contact; (d) dans une situation bien définie, obtenir autant d'idéophones "synonymes" que possible qui sont susceptibles de servir dans cette situation, puis demander à d'autres sujets (sans préciser la situation ou le contexte) de fournir d'autres exemples d'usage de tous ces divers idéophones. On arrive ainsi à distinguer les éléments à sens voisin. Il y aurait alors intérêt, dans le dictionnaire, à grouper les idéophones à sens voisin à la manière d'un thésaurus pour pouvoir en préciser le sens. Il faut surtout éviter de dire que dans telle langue il y a, par exemple, 18 mots voulant dire la même chose.