

Ideophones and sensory language in social interaction

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Outline

- Ideophones (a.k.a. mimetics, expressives) are marked words that depict sensory imagery, found in many of the world's languages.
 - We know a lot about ideophone phonology, morphosyntax, iconicity, lexical typology, translation, learning and many other fields — but social interaction is understudied.
 - Conversation is the primary ecology of language in use (Dingemanse and Floyd 2014)
 - Studying ideophones and sensory language in conversation can offer a useful complement to work based on elicited data and monologic narratives
- Consider sensory language.
 - Viberg's universal hierarchy of sensory modalities: SEE > HEAR > TOUCH > TASTE, SMELL (Viberg 1984) captures the directionality of meaning extensions
 - This 'universalist' hierarchy has been questioned by anthropologists (Classen 1993), who argue for substantial variation in cultural elaboration of sensory modalities
 - We sampled perception verbs in conversation in 13 diverse languages and cultures and found support for both perspectives: references to vision outstrip all other senses, but the ranking of non-visual verbs varies (San Roque et al. 2015)
 - The units of analysis matter a great deal: looking at ideophones instead of perception verbs, we would get TOUCH < HEAR < SEE < FEEL < TASTE in Siwu (using a data-driven categorisation of cross-modal ideophones, cf. Dingemanse and Majid 2012)
- Key question: When and why do people use ideophones?
 - Why — prior work has argued for expressing emotion (Burbridge 1938), dramatizing narratives (Fortune 1962; Kunene 1978), creating involvement (Nuckolls 1996; Herlofsky 1997), and sharing identity (Childs 1994; Lydall 2000)
 - When — prior work has focused almost exclusively on narrative: the favourite data source of the field linguist (easy to collect, transcribe, analyse)
 - But *when* must precede *why*: what we find depends on where we look.
 - Looking at ideophones in everyday conversation confirms and extends prior findings.
 - Besides idyllic emotion-sharing we find pedagogical, competitive and agonistic uses.
- Proposals and predictions
 - All uses of ideophones build on their fundamental nature as *appeals to direct experience by means of perceptual analogies*: they are the next best thing to having been there
 - So besides drama, colour and involvement in narratives, we find uses in expert-novice interaction (Mihas 2013), doctor-patient interaction (Sakamoto et al. 2014), interface design (Kusaba, Doizaki, and Sakamoto 2016), and many as-yet-undescribed settings.
 - More research is needed on the factors that shape and constrain the use of ideophones across languages and across ways of speaking.

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