

Ideophones and sensory language in social interaction

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The last two decades have seen a remarkable growth in studies of ideophones (mimetics, expressives, onomatopoeia). Parallel to this is a resurgence in linguistic research on sensory language, focusing mostly on verbs of perception and universal or culture-specific hierarchies of the senses. Here I focus on the intersection of ideophones and sensory language in a conversational corpus of Siwu, a Kwa language of Ghana. Many ideophone studies focus on formal properties like phonology, reduplication, morphosyntax, and iconicity. The next frontier for ideophone studies is to understand when and why people use ideophones in social interaction. After all, if form follows function (as it often does in language), examining the use of ideophones will not only deliver new insights on sensory language, but may also help explain some formal properties of ideophones.

In a small but systematic sample of 6x10 minutes from different conversations, I collected all perception verbs (106 tokens) and all ideophones (43 tokens), and classified them into six broad sensory modalities: vision, hearing, touch, taste, smell, and interoception. While perception verbs are relatively frequent, they show little diversity in terms of sensory domains, covering only vision (81%) and hearing (19%) in this sample. This is the kind of data usually put forward to establish the primacy of sight and sound (in that order) over the other senses (San Roque et al. 2015). But the rank order of the senses would look quite different when based on the lexical frequency of ideophones: in this sample, ideophones cover the senses of touch (30%), hearing (26%), vision (16%), interoception (16%), and taste (12%). So word choice matters in ranking the senses, and ideophones may better reveal culture-specific patterns of sensory elaboration than generic perception verbs.

Next I consider the interactional functions of ideophones and verbs of perception using conversation analytic methods. Whereas perception verbs like ‘see’ and ‘hear’ are primarily used to direct attention (explaining both their frequency and some common grammaticalization paths), ideophones show a wider range of uses, from evoking events in stories to calibrating perceptual knowledge during joint work, and from conveying personal perceptual experiences to teasing and joking about appearances. A survey of the literature on ideophone use beyond Siwu shows that these functions recur in language after language, and revolve around the depictive nature of ideophones: their capacity to bring to life sensory imagery in ways that few other verbal resources do (Dingemans and Akita 2016). I conclude by sketching some ways forward in the systematic comparative study of ideophone use in conversation.

References

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