

# The Structure of Ideophones in African and Asian Languages: The Case of Dagaare and Cantonese

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## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Words and how they are categorized into classes constitute a fundamental aspect of knowledge about the structure of language. Indeed, when children learn the words of their first language they learn and develop three basic types of information within their mental lexicon: categorial information e.g. *meet*, *verb*; subcategorial information, e.g. *meet*, *verb*, *transitive*, and thematic grid: semantic roles e.g. *kick* <*Agent*, *Patient*>. Such information constitutes important information for modeling the grammar of the language in question and the architecture of grammar as a whole.

This means therefore that developing clearly definable categories for all words of a language is an important endeavour in syntactic analysis. This is because words of a particular category or subcategory tend to have their own peculiar grammar. In Dagaare, for instance, there are separate rules and constraints governing nominal and verbal tonologies.

However, it is often difficult to pin down the words of a language into neatly groomed word classes. And certainly not all word classes are existent in all languages, nor are their relative occurrences the same from language to language.

The class of words called variously *ideophones*, *expressives*, etc. are a case in point. While a lot has been written about ideophones in some language groups, not much has been written about this group of words in some other language groups. The term is quite prevalent in African linguistics but not so common in Asian linguistics, at least not in Chinese linguistics. Ideophones should form a relatively concrete point of reference in a comparative study involving African and Asian languages. Indeed, there have been calls for exactly such a study (Watson 2001).

In this paper we aim to address a number of issues, as outlined below, surrounding the term/concept of ideophones with data from Dagaare, a Gur language of West Africa and Cantonese, a Yue dialect of Chinese. Examples are sometimes drawn from other African and Asian languages towards an understanding of this group of words.

- (i) What are the properties of an ideophone/what makes a word qualify as an ideophone? In other words, are there peculiar phonology, morphological, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic features for ideophones?
- (ii) Do Dagaare and Cantonese/Chinese have ideophones? Are there different types of ideophones in each of these languages?
- (iii) If there are ideophones in Dagaare/African languages and in Chinese/Asian languages, are there any similarities between ideophones in these two groups of languages? Any systematic differences? Do the ideophones within each language and across languages belong to the same word class or are they in different word classes?
- (iv) What can the study of ideophones in African and Asian languages tell us about the universality of word classes? Are ideophones important for formal linguistic studies?
- (v) What do ideophones tell us about the link between language, literature, and culture?

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful for comments by participants of ACAL35, Harvard University, USA and some anonymous reviewers on various parts of the paper.

Towards responding to some or all of these questions/issues, some candidate data in Dagaare and Cantonese are presented and discussed in sections 3 and 4 respectively. We claim that both sets of data pass as ideophones. Section 5 concludes the paper with a brief comparison of Dagaare and Cantonese ideophones.

## 2. Towards a Definition of Ideophones

Doke (1935) is often credited with the term “ideophone” which is defined as: “A vivid representation of an idea in sound...a word, often onomatopoeic, which describes a predicate, qualificative or adverb in respect to manner, colour, sound, smell, action, state or intensity.” (Doke 1935: 118, cited in Voeltz and Kilian-Hatz 2001). The term has found its way into many linguistic texts, especially dictionaries and lexicons. Trask (1993: 131-132) defines an ideophone as “[O]ne of a grammatically distinct class of words, occurring in certain languages, which typically express either distinctive sounds or visually distinctive types of action.” Crystal (1997:189) on the other hand defines an ideophone as a “...term used in linguistics and phonetics for any vivid representation of an idea in sound, such as occurs through onomatopoeia.” Crystal goes on to specify that in Bantu linguistics, “it is the name of a particular word class containing sound symbolic words”. Indeed, in many other languages of Africa and other parts of the world, ideophones are often treated as belonging to a specific word class (Bodomo (2000) for Dagaare, Kulemeka (1997) for Chichewa, Newman (1968, 2000) for Hausa, etc.). However, there is considerable controversy as to whether they constitute a coherent class or are indeed distributed across many word classes. Whether or not they belong to different word classes, the following general criteria are often attributed to ideophones.

### 2.1 Phonology/Morphology

Ideophones are said to form a phonologically distinct group from other words in the language. Though they employ the same phonological inventories as other words, they have distinct phonological properties or even processes with regards to other words in the individual language. These properties have to be identified for each language.

The morphology of the ideophone often displays more iconicity and sound-symbolism than other words in the language. In many African languages, they tend to be longer words to describe repetition or the intensity of an action or event they lexicalize. A salient feature that distinguishes ideophones from many other words is that there is hardly any affixation in the morphology of this group of words.

### 2.2 Syntax/Semantics

Ideophones cannot normally be syntactically modified whereas other words in the language can be modified. As will be shown for Dagaare in section 3, ideophones do not usually enter into phrase structure constructions with other words like adjectives to form compound words and phrases. Semantically, they are characterized by the lack of hyponymy, i.e., they cannot usually have hyponyms below them as one would have for nouns e.g. *furniture: chairs, tables, beds*.

### 2.3 Pragmatic Functions

There are often very large numbers of ideophones in spoken texts. These often express more spontaneous reactions of the speaker in the speech context as compared to similar expressions in written texts. A second pragmatic function of ideophones is one of phonesthematicity. Ideophones are phonesthemes in function in the sense that they directly imitate sounds in nature. In other words, most, though not all, are onomatopoeic in nature, such as imitating the cock’s crow, e.g. *konkoliirikoo* (Dagaare), *kokrokoo* (Akan), *cookoo* (English), *cock-a-doodle-do* (American English), and *gok4-gok1-gok3-gok6* (Cantonese).

In order to address some of these issues more concretely, we will now outline and discuss some candidate data in Dagaare.

### 3. Ideophones in Dagaare

Ideophones in Dagaare have specific morphophonological, syntactic, and semantic characteristics that no other word class in the language consistently exhibits. The data in (1) with example sentences in (2) may be used as an illustration to begin analyzing the phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic/pragmatic structure of what we consider to be ideophones in Dagaare.

- (1) *gbànggbàlàng / gbàngbálàng* 'of a long pole or thing falling down'  
*vàrkpàrà / vârkpàrá* 'in a messy way'  
*gàrmànà / gârmáná* 'spread across a surface'  
*bònggòlòng / bónggólòng* 'of a fat and unwieldy mass'  
*bìlbàlà / bìlbáláá* 'of a huge item lying down'
- (2) a. *à lánngbàráá lá ká ó dé lóó, gbàngbàràng*  
 DEF hook FOC COMP 3.SG take throw down, IDEOPH.  
 'It is the hook s/he has thrown down.'
- b. *bíńí lá ká ó nyè bíng, vârkpàrà*  
 excreta FOC COMP 3.SG shit put down, IDEOPH.  
 'It is excreta s/he has shit.'
- c. *à bíé bàlèè lá, à páà lè gàngè, gârmáná*  
 DEF child tire-PERF FOC DEF then fall lie down, IDEOPH.  
 'The child is tired and then is lying there.'
- d. *nyé ò nàng páà zèng bònngòlòng lé*  
 see 3.SG when then sit IDEOPH. PART  
 'Just see how s/he is seated!'
- e. *ò dé lá à dāngmáá lóó, bìlbàlá*  
 3.SG take FOC DEF log throw.down IDEOPH.  
 'He threw down the log.'

#### 3.1 Phonology

Four salient features characterize the Dagaare ideophone. The first feature is about syllable structure. The Dagaare ideophone generally has a three-syllable structure. This is exemplified by all the ideophones presented in (2). The second feature is that the vowels of the first syllable are usually copied on to the subsequent syllables, as illustrated by the ideophone words in (2a-d). However, there are some exceptions, such as with the ideophone word in (2e). Third, and quite importantly, there is usually only one tonal quality, either low or high, on the entire stretch of the three-syllable word. Finally, each ideophone can be produced either as a uniquely low tone lexeme or as a uniquely high tone one, with a slight variation in meaning, as explained further below in section 3.2.

#### 3.2 Tonosemantics: Synesthesia

The low-toned ones refer to heavier, longer, or fatter entities, while the high-toned ones refer to

<sup>2</sup> Symbols and abbreviations used in this paper:

2. = second person; 3. = third person; CL = classifier; COMP = complementizer; DEF = definite; DET = determiner; FOC = focus marker; IDEOPH. = ideophone; INTENS = intensifier; NEG = negative marker; PART = particle; PERF = perfective aspect; PL = plural marker.

lighter, shorter and thinner entities. This is often referred to as synesthesia, situations where oppositions in phonological qualities may correlate with oppositions in meaning qualities. This is the case in many languages (Watson 2001) and extends to issues like segment quality and height, ATR features, etc.

### 3.3 Morphology

The morphology of the Dagaare ideophone is quite distinct from that of words with similar morphological appearances. In many instances in Dagaare words, morphemes ending with final consonants can have an epenthetic vowel at the end, as the basic syllable structure of the language is CV. The following words belong to different word classes and exhibit this feature of vowel epenthesis on their morphemes:

- (3) Article: *kàńg ~ kàngá* 'a certain'  
 Verb: *làng ~ làngè* 'to gather, to add'  
 Verb: *tàng ~ tángè* 'to keep quiet'  
 Noun: *náng ~ nángá* 'scorpion'  
 Noun: *gáń ~ gánè* 'book'  
 Adjective: *kpòńg ~ kpóngè* 'big'

The following ideophones, which end in consonants, however, do not exhibit this feature of epenthesis or final vowel realization.

- (4) a.i. *gbàngbàlàng - \*gbàngbàlàngè*  
 'of a long pole or thing falling down'
- ii. *Á lánngbáràà dà lè gángéé lá, gbàngbàlàng!*  
 DEF hook past fall lie.down FOC IDEOPH.  
 'The hook fell down very hard (in a loud noise).'
- b. i. *bònggòlòng - \*bònggòlònge*  
 'big, unwieldy in nature'
- ii. *Á dǝǝ zú bònggòlòng nǎ wǎè lá*  
 DEF man head IDEOPH. DEM come FOC  
 'The man with the big/unwieldy head has come.'

The ideophones in (4a) and (4b) modify verbs/predicates and nouns, respectively, without any change in their morphological structures.

### 3.4 Syntax

Ideophones in Dagaare, unlike those of comparative word classes, do not lend themselves to morphosyntactic modifications, nor enter into phrase structure constructions with other words, as do, for instance, adjectives and nouns:

|    | <b>Noun</b>              | <b>Adjective</b>    | <b>NP</b>                       |
|----|--------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------------|
| a. | <i>zú</i><br>'head'      | <i>fáá</i><br>'bad' | <i>zú-fáá</i><br>'bad head'     |
| b. | <i>zúrí</i><br>'head.PL' | <i>fáá</i><br>'bad' | <i>zú-fáá-rí</i><br>'bad heads' |

***but***

|        | <b>Noun</b>              | <b>Ideophone</b>                             | <b>Noun Ideophone</b>                           |
|--------|--------------------------|--|---|
| (6) a. | <i>zû</i><br>'head'      | <i>b̀̀ngg̀̀l̀̀ng</i><br>'unwieldy-like, big' | <i>zû-b̀̀ngg̀̀l̀̀ng</i><br>'unwieldy-like head' |
| b.     | <i>zúrí</i><br>'head.PL' | <i>b̀̀ngg̀̀l̀̀ng</i><br>'unwieldy-like, big' | * <i>zû-b̀̀ngg̀̀l̀̀ng-rí</i>                    |

To express the concept of big, unwieldy heads, i.e. two or more heads that look big and unwieldy using ideophones, one would have to reduplicate the ideophone: *zú b̀̀ngg̀̀l̀̀ng b̀̀ngg̀̀l̀̀ng*, thus leaving its internal morphology intact and integral!

In addition, as mentioned earlier and as can be seen in the sentences above, ideophones are often used as independent clauses, though not always, as in (4b). Even when they occur within the clause they still behave differently from comparable words. One of such features is the possibility of inserting a pause before pronouncing them.

### 3.5 Semantics/Pragmatics

Besides their unique phonological, morphological, and syntactic features as outlined above, ideophones, unlike comparable word classes such as adjectives, adverbs, and verbs do not seem to have independent semantics. As can be seen from the above glosses and transliterations, it is hard, though not impossible, to pin them down and assign denotational, dictionary meanings to them. They depend on adjacent words and other contexts for their meaning. This again makes this class of words unique in the language. To fully understand the denotational meaning of an ideophone, one would have to glean hints from various contextual cues. Rather than giving a comprehensive picture of all contexts in which ideophones occur in this language, I will illustrate the point here in (7):

- (7) a. *Á p̀̀g-léé ðà àr̀̀è lá, gyírménéé*  
 DEF woman-small past stand.PERF, FOC IDEOPH.  
 'The girl stood there, IDEOPH.'
- b. *à ðagaráa ða ìè gángeé lá, garmàà*  
 DEF pole past fall lie.down FOC IDEOPH.  
 'It has fallen down, IDEOPH.'

The ideophone in (7a), *gyírménéé* can have any denotational meaning expressing something like 'not heavy', 'not fat', 'not thick' and 'not large', but one cannot pin down the real semantics from among these possibilities. One would, however, expect that since we are talking of a girl ('small woman'), we are referring to her being light in weight, slim and generally small in size.

In addition, as shown with the synesthetic characterization of the ideophone, the speaker is more likely to choose high tones to express the ideophone for small and lighter things and lower tones for the heavier, bigger, and longer things. In this case, higher tones are likely to be deployed in pronouncing the ideophone in (7a), as we are dealing with a small, lighter entity while lower tones would be used to express the ideophone in (7b), as we are dealing with a pole which, by nature, is a longer, possibly heavier entity.

Finally, ideophones in Dagaare, as in many other languages, are very much used in oral descriptions and recountings such as in stories and folktales.

It is clear, therefore, from the above that there are compelling reasons for assigning a word class of ideophones in Dagaare. From a comparative point of view these facts of ideophones constitute important empirical issues for discussing linguistic categorization.

#### 4. Towards a Case for a Class of Ideophones in Cantonese

This section investigates the possibility that such a group of words, as has been noted for Dagaare, exists in Cantonese, and if so, whether this type of words constitutes a grammatical category. With this goal in mind the paper analyses a group of reduplicated words in Cantonese that have been termed “complex adjectives” (Lau 1999), a term I do not subscribe to in this paper. Our working hypothesis is that these are indeed ideophones based on evidence from their morphophonology, syntax, and semantics.

##### 4.1 Cantonese examples of ‘Complex Adjectives’

In Cantonese, a Yue dialect of Chinese, a group of words with striking morphophonological, syntactic and semantic features seem to be very much comparable to the class of words called ideophones in Dagaare and other African languages. They seem, at first blush, to be composed out of adjectives and, as mentioned above, have indeed been categorized as a class of adjectives and given the term ‘complex adjectives’ (Lau 1999). However, a striking difference between these and ‘simple adjectives’ in Chinese is that it is hard to give them denotational, dictionary meanings. If they were really a class of adjectives, they ought to have identifiable meanings like other adjectives. Rather, their striking morphophonology, syntax and semantics make them look and behave more like ideophones in the grammars of other languages where this word class has been attested. Based on a corpus of ‘complex adjectives’ elicited from speaker-linguists of Cantonese over a number of years (Bodomo 2000 - 2005), we will compare the morphophonological, syntactic and semantic features of ideophones in African languages with those of the ‘complex adjectives’ in Cantonese<sup>3</sup>.

##### 4.2 Morphophonology

Like ideophones, reduplication is an overarching morphophonological feature in the formation of Cantonese ‘complex adjectives’. Often an adjective or a part of it is reduplicated in a number of ways to get a ‘complex adjective’. The following is a general tendency:

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<sup>3</sup> An anonymous reviewer has questioned whether the category ‘adjective’ exists at all in Cantonese, and has stated that he or she is of the belief that Cantonese uses verbs where other languages use adjectives. Obviously, adjectives exist in the language and do indeed have qualificative effects on nominals as shown here:

*Keoi5 hai6 leng3 nei2*  
 3SG be beautiful girl  
 ‘She is a beautiful girl.’

However, it is true that most of such words adjacent to the nouns they qualify become verbs when used predicatively:

*Keoi5 leng3-zo2 wo3*  
 3SG beautiful-PERF PART  
 ‘She has become beautiful.’

| Type | Form                | Description  | Components                       |                     | Example(s)  | Meaning                        |
|------|---------------------|--|----------------------------------|---------------------|---|--------------------------------|
| (i)  | <b>AA-<br/>dei2</b> | Monosyllabic adj. (A) is reduplicated, followed by the particle 'dei2'. The reduplicated item is normally pronounced with a high rising tone (though it is also acceptable to retain the tone of A).                                       | <u>A</u>                         | <u>dei2</u>         |   |                                |
|      |                     |  | <i>fei2<sup>4</sup></i><br>'fat' | <i>dei2</i>         | <i>fei4 fei2 dei2</i>   | 'a bit/somewhat fat'           |
|      |                     |  | <i>coeng4</i><br>'long'          | <i>dei2</i>         | <i>coeng4</i><br><i>coeng2 dei2</i>   | 'a bit/somewhat long'          |
|      |                     |  | <i>haam4</i><br>'salty'          | <i>dei2</i>         | <i>haam4 haam2 dei2</i>   | 'a bit/somewhat salty'         |
| (ii) | <b>A-XX</b>         | Monosyllabic adj. (A) serves as the root, followed by XX. The form and meaning of X is usually difficult to pin down. It mainly serves to help <i>express</i> the vivaciousness of one's feeling towards the entity one wants to describe. | <u>A</u>                         | <u>X</u>            |   |                                |
|      |                     |  | <i>tim4</i><br>'sweet'           | <i>je4</i>          | <i>tim4 je4 je4</i>   | 'sweet-ish'                    |
|      |                     |  | <i>jyun5</i><br>'soft'           | <i>lam4</i>         | <i>jyun5 lam4</i><br><i>lam4</i>  | 'soft-ish'                     |
|      |                     | Two types of X:<br>(a) X is a bound morpheme:<br>X is meaningless when it stands alone.  | <i>sap1</i><br>'wet'             | <u><i>det6</i></u>  | <i>sap1 det6 det6</i>   | 'wet'                          |
|      |                     | (b) X is a free morpheme:<br>X has its own meaning.<br>( <i>dap1</i> means 'down'.)  | <i>tau5</i><br>'head'            | <u><i>dap1</i></u>  | <i>tau5 dap1</i><br><u><i>dap1</i></u>  | 'head-down'                    |
|      |                     | In most cases, each 'complex adjective' has a unique X, which cannot be freely attached to another A.  | <i>cau3</i><br>'stinky'          | <u><i>bang1</i></u> | <i>cau3 bang1</i><br><u><i>bang1</i></u>  | 'stinky'                       |
|      |                     |  | <i>hoeng1</i><br>'fragrant'      | <u><i>pan3</i></u>  | <i>*hoeng1</i><br><u><i>bang1 bang1</i></u><br><br><i>hoeng1 pan3</i><br><u><i>pan3</i></u> | 'fragrant, good smell of food' |

<sup>4</sup> The romanization scheme adopted in this paper is based on the one developed by The Linguistic Society of Hong Kong (2002). There are altogether six tones in this scheme: 1 = high level; 2 = high rising; 3 = mid level; 4 = low falling; 5 = low rising; 6 = low level. The tone is marked at the end of each character.

But consider these examples:

It seems that *nap6* carries the same meaning.

It is likely that if *X* is unbound, it may be interchangeable.

*ci1*      *nap6*      *ci1 nap6 nap6*      ‘sticky’  
‘sticky’

*sap1*      *nap6*      *sap1 nap6*      ‘wet’  
‘wet’      *nap6*

|       |             |   |                              |                          |  |                                |
|-------|-------------|---|------------------------------|--------------------------|--|--------------------------------|
| (iii) | <b>XX-A</b> | Reversed form of (ii). A limited number of Cantonese ‘complex adjectives’ can appear as both A-XX and XX-A (meaning can still be maintained). | <u><b>X</b></u>              | <u><b>A</b></u>          |  |                                |
|       |             |   | <i>bok1</i>                  | <i>ceoi3</i><br>‘crispy’ | <i>bok1 bok1</i><br><i>ceoi3</i><br><i>ceoi3 bok1</i><br><i>bok1</i> | ‘crispy’<br>‘crispy’           |
| (iv)  | <b>NAA</b>  | Noun + Adj. Adj.  | <u><b>N</b></u>              | <u><b>A</b></u>          |  |                                |
|       |             |   | <i>ngaan5</i><br>‘eye’       | <i>daai6</i><br>‘big’    | <i>ngaan5 daai6</i><br><i>daai6</i>                                  | ‘having big eyes’              |
| (v)   | <b>NVV</b>  | Noun + V V  | <u><b>N</b></u>              | <u><b>V</b></u>          |  |                                |
|       |             |   | <i>ngaan5</i><br>‘eye’       | <i>zaam2</i><br>‘blink’  | <i>ngaan5 zaam2</i><br><i>zaam2</i>                                  | ‘eye blinking’                 |
| (vi)  | <b>AB</b>   | AB (existing Adj.) → AABB   | <u><b>AB</b></u>             |                          |  |                                |
|       |             |   | <i>faai3 ceoi3</i><br>‘fast’ |                          | <i>faai3 faai3</i><br><i>ceoi3 ceoi3</i>                             | ‘quickly’                      |
| (vii) | <b>AIBI</b> | A1B1 (bound) → A1A1B1B1   | <u><b>AIBI</b></u>           |                          |  |                                |
|       |             |   | * <i>tiu3 zaat3</i>          |                          | <i>tiu3 tiu3 zaat3</i><br><i>zaat3</i>                               | ‘jumping up and down’ (active) |

### 4.3 Syntax

Like the Dagaare examples seen earlier, ‘complex adjectives’ seem to resist integration into the clausal syntax of Cantonese. While it is true that some of these are an integral part of the predicate-clausal template or the main clause, often the ‘complex adjective’, unlike adjectives in the language, seems to form a clause of its own, or is often in some kind of topic or focus relations with the predicate-clausal template. The sentences below (8) – (11) show ‘complex adjective’ constructions, indicating that the target group of words here does not form an integral part of the clause. This distribution is



juxtaposed with (b) sentences containing regular adjectives to illustrate the contrast:

- (8) a. *gaan1 fong2 hak1 maal maal, nei5 dim2 tai2 dou2 syu1 gaa3*  
 CL room **black maa maa** 2.SG how read able to book PART  
 ‘This room is so dark. How can you read?’
- b. *keoi5 gam1 jat6 zoek3 hak1 sik1 kwan1*  
 3.SG today wear black dress  
 ‘She is wearing a black dress today.’
- (9) a. *keoi5 se2 dou3 dil zi6 mat6 zat1 zat1 gam2, hou2 naan4 tai2 wo3*  
 3.SG write dou DET words **dense zat zat** -like, INTENS difficult read PART  
 ‘S/he writes in a “densely-packed” manner. It’s so difficult to understand.’
- b. *keoi go faa jyun di syu saang dak hou mat*  
 3.SG CL flower yard DET tree grow dak INTENS dense  
 ‘The trees in his/her garden are densely grown.’
- (10) a. *go3 dei6 haa2 sap1 det6 det6, hou2 sin3 aa3!*  
 CL floor **wet det det** INTENS slippery PART  
 ‘The floor is so wet and slippery.’
- b. *m4 goi1 lo2 faai3 sap1 mou4 gan1 bei2 ngo5 aal*  
 please take CL wet towel bei 1.SG PART  
 ‘Please get me a wet towel.’
- (11) a. *keoi5 zoek3 dou3 hung4 dong1 dong3 gam2, m4 zil hai6 mai6 heoi3 jam2 nei1?*  
 3.SG wear dou **red dong dong** -like, NEG know whether go drink PART  
 ‘S/he is dressed in red today. Isn’t she attending a banquet?’
- b. *keoi5 gwaa3 zo2 zil hung4 kei4 hai2 tin1faa1baan2*  
 3.SG hang PERF CL red flag PREP ceiling  
 ‘S/he has hung a red flag on the ceiling.’
- (12) *dim2 gaai2 bui1 sei2 tim4 tim2/4 dei2 gam2 ge2?*  
 Why CL water **sweet-sweet -dei** -like PART  
 ‘Why is this cup of water kind of sweet?’
- (13) *nei5 jiu3 gwaai1 gwaai1 dei2 teng1 sin1 saang1 waa6 aa3*  
 2.SG have to **good good -dei** listen teacher words PART  
 ‘You have to behave well and listen to the teachers.’
- (14) *keoi5 zou6 je5 seng4 jat6 leon6 leon6 zeon6 zeon6 gam2 ge2*  
 3.SG do thing always **clumsy** -like PART  
 ‘S/he does things clumsily.’
- (15) *go2 go3 po4 po2 seng4 jat6 gul1 ling1 ling1 jat1 go3 jan4 sik6 faan6 gaa3*  
 DET CL old lady always **lonely** one CL person eat rice PART  
 ‘That old lady is so lonely that she always has meals on her own.’
- (16) *Nei5 laa4 laa2 seng1 zou6 maai4 dil je5 jin4 hau6 heoi3 sik6 faan6 laa1*  
 2.SG **hurry up** do PERF DET thing then go eat rice PART  
 ‘You should hurry up and finish your work so that you can have your meal.’

Second, it appears that, like the Dagaare data, ‘complex adjectives’ do not enter into morphosyntactic modification. While they may qualify or extend the meaning of some other word class or phrase in the syntax, they are, by themselves, not modified by other word classes, nor do they enter into any morphosyntactic affixation to form phrases or other units of syntax within the construction.

On these and possibly many other syntactic counts, it is plausible to see ‘complex adjectives’ in Cantonese behaving very much like ideophones in Dagaare and many other languages.

#### *4.4 Semantic/pragmatic Functions*

Semantically, as mentioned earlier, ‘complex adjectives’ in Cantonese do not seem to have independent denotational, dictionary meanings. While it may be relatively easy to gloss different parts of the complex adjective, morpheme for morpheme, it is relatively hard to gloss and translate the whole ideophone as a compositional unit with one word. One way out of this is to use a multiword gloss or translation for a single ideophonic word in the language. This is exactly the case with ideophones in many languages that depend on the meaning of other words or on the context of the enunciation for meaning ascription.

In pragmatic terms, speaker-linguists often say that ‘complex adjectives’ feature more in colloquial and oral language situations than in formal and written language contexts. This again is exactly the situation in many cultures with ideophones attested in their languages.

## **5. Conclusions**

In this paper, we have outlined the features of ideophones as attested in many languages of Africa and elsewhere. We have then focused on candidate data in Dagaare and Cantonese. We have found that there are consistent similarities between attested ideophones and the so-called ‘complex adjectives’ in Cantonese. We will thus like to claim that these ‘complex adjectives’ are indeed ideophones.

### *5.1 Summary*

Ideophones exist in both Dagaare and Cantonese. In the formation of ideophones in these two languages, reduplication is saliently deployed. In both groups of words there is no independence of semantic denotation. They are used as expressives in both languages. These expressive phenomena are more recurrent in oral and non-formal situations in both languages than in written and formal contexts. All these are features shared by ideophones in many other African and Asian languages.

There are, however, some differences. These attested ideophones in Dagaare and Cantonese may belong to one word class in each language but they are more like adverbials in Dagaare, on the one hand, and more like adjectives in Cantonese, on the other.

Pragmatically, there may be more occurrences of ideophones in Dagaare speech/texts than in Cantonese speech/texts, though this point needs further study.

### *5.2 Revisiting the Issues*

It can be seen from the above sections that many of the issues we began with, as reproduced below, have been addressed:

- (i) What are the properties of an ideophone/what makes a word qualify as an ideophone? In other words are there peculiar phonology, morphological, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic features for ideophones?
- (ii) Do Dagaare (and other African languages represented in the workshop) and Cantonese/Chinese have ideophones? Are there different types of ideophones in each of these languages?
- (iii) If there are ideophones in Dagaare/African languages and in Chinese/Asian languages, are

there any similarities between ideophones in these two groups of languages? Any systematic differences? Do the ideophones within each language and across languages belong to the same word class or are they in different word classes?

- (iv) What can the study of ideophones in African and Asian languages tell us about the universality of word classes? Are ideophones important for formal linguistic studies?
- (v) What do ideophones tell us about the link between language, literature, and culture?

Clearly, ideophones have a striking grammatical structure that sets them apart from other word classes in each language. In the establishment of word classes it is usually these same formal and functional criteria that are used to tease words apart. We can thus safely conclude that ideophones are a cohesive class of words and that this cohesive class exists in each of Dagaare and Cantonese. Within this cohesive class, however, one may have subparts, and subcategorization is indeed a feature of word classes in general.

A number of similarities have been attested between Dagaare and Cantonese ideophones. But we have also observed that ideophones in Dagaare are more like adverbials in the language, while Cantonese ideophones are more like Cantonese adjectives. Again, this is a feature of word classes across languages. The relative distances between various word classes within a language may not be the same from language to language.

The foregoing observation has consequences with regard to lexical categorization across languages. Surely, we can say that one can find word classes in each language, which is not a new thing to say, but that, more interestingly, word classes may not have the same taxonomy from language to language, and that indeed some word classes, as is the case with ideophones, are existent in some languages but not in others. Moreover, the constellation of word class relationships will necessarily differ from language to language. The consequences, then, for formal syntactic representation mean, among others, that one has to contend with different phrasal categorizations with their attendant reflexes in syntactic analysis.

The study has also addressed the fact that ideophones have a special expressive and dramaturgic function that other words may lack in any one language. This therefore means that the study of ideophones can indeed go beyond the realms of core linguistics to areas like literature, narrative strategies, indirection, and the expression of emotion with linguistic and semi-linguistic or dramaturgic resources such as ideophones. Ideophones seem to form an important element of verbal art and a study of these words could link one from linguistics to the realms of communication, cognition, and culture.

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