

Touch Ideophones in Nyagbo

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1. Introduction

The phenomenon of ideophones in African languages has been widely discussed (cf. Westermann 1930, Doke 1935, Samarin 1965, Childs 1994, Ameka 2001, Dingemanse 2011, among others). A widely cited definition of ideophones is Doke's (1935: 118):

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 distinguishes between ideophones and mimic nouns and onomatopoeia while noting that rules of length, tone, and stress apply differently in ideophones, and set them apart from ordinary lexical categories. Voeltz and Killian-Hatz (2001: 2) capture the peculiarity of the ideophone in the following statement:

[I]deophones often have a particular often special phonology, they do not entirely fit into normal syntactic patterns and they are semantically highly marked, while at the same time fulfilling functions of other, easier definable grammatical categories.

Dingemanse (2011: 133), describing the ideophone in Siwu (a Ghana-Togo Mountain language spoken in the Volta Region of Ghana), echoes their peculiarity thus: "its properties include deviant phonotactics, special word structures, expressive morphology, syntactic aloofness, foregrounded prosody, sensory semantics and a depictive mode of signification." Peculiarity features prominently in his proposed definition (emphasis mine): "ideophones are marked words that depict sensory images" (Dingemanse 2011: 25). This definition, in addition to highlighting the peculiar nature of ideophones, also points to the fact that their mode of representation is depictive rather than descriptive, that is to say they enable listeners to experience what it is like to perceive a sensory image.

Dingemanse (2009, 2011) notes that while the phonology and syntax of ideophones have been widely discussed, their semantics "(the meanings of ideophones) and social interaction (their actual use in discourse)" have not. He writes that this is because the two areas "are the most difficult to investigate, requiring field research, participant observation, intricate elicitation techniques and extensive corpora of naturally occurring data" (Dingemanse 2011: 3). This paper investigates the semantics and use of four ideophones in Nyagbo using the texture booklet, an elicitation tool developed by Asifa et al. (2007). While two of the words have more generic meaning and wider use, the other two are more restricted in their meaning.¹

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: in section 2 I discuss the typological characteristics of Nyagbo. Section 3 discusses some phonological properties of Nyagbo ideophones, drawing on similar properties discussed for their counterparts in Siwu. I also discuss the method I used to collect

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the data for this paper. Section 4 discusses ideophones that were elicited with the texture booklet and their meaning, while section 5 concludes the paper.

2. Typological Characteristics

Nyagbo belongs to the 14 Ghana-Togo-Mountain (GTM) languages, which are also known as Togoresprachen (Struck 1912), Togo Remnant languages (Westerman and Bryan 1952), and Central Togo (Dakubu and Ford 1988). The ethnonym is *Batrugbu* (singular is *Atrugbu*), and the language is known as *Tutrugbu*. Nyagbo is a tonal language with three level and two contour tones. The low and mid tones contrast in *anɔ*² ‘person’ and *anó* ‘it is black.’ A minimal pair of the level tones can be found in the words *amó* ‘breast’, *amɔ* ‘he or she has seen,’ *ámɔ* ‘he or she is seeing,’ and *adya* ‘brother,’ *adyá* ‘he or she cuts,’ and *ádyá* ‘he or she is cutting.’ So far I have not found contour tone minimal pairs but the rising tone occurs in such words as *mě* ‘be non-existent’ while the falling tone occurs in words like *kpá* ‘be dry.’ The rising tone also occurs on the syllable preceding the verb while the verb takes a mid tone in the progressive. This is shown in the sentence below³:

- (1) *A-nyé* *ǎ-bā*
 PREF-man AM:PROG-come
 ‘The man is coming.’

Nyagbo has a seven oral-vowel and five nasal vowel system which participate in harmony where the choice of vocalic prefix is based on either the stem or root vowel of the lexical item. Examples are provided in the sentences below:

- (2a) *ε-mɔ* *yofó-áné* *ba - dzě* *tá- bha*
 1SG-see white.person-PL CM-woman AM-two
 ‘I see white people two women.’
- (2b) *i-vũ* *e-zĩ*
 1SG-catch CM-thief
 ‘I caught a thief.’

The first person singular pronoun in (2a) is [ε] because the vowel of the verb is [-ATR] while in (2b), it is [i] because its verb has a [+ATR] vowel.

Like most related languages, a good number of adjectival concepts in Nyagbo are expressed with a verb. Examples are *she* ‘become old’, *kpɔbɔ* ‘become short’, *kpe* ‘become plenty’, *nε* ‘become wide’ and *dǔ* ‘become thick.’ There are a number of elements that occur within the noun phrase paradigm and function as attributive adjectives. These adjectives are either derived (e.g. *kpɔkpɔbɔ* ‘short’, *dodǔ* ‘thick’, etc.) or ideophonic, e.g. *bũli* ‘small’, *tsɔlɔlɔ* ‘slender and *gũli* ‘short’ (cf. Essegbey 2010).

Finally, Nyagbo has a noun class system which consists of 5 singular, 4 plural classes, and one mass-noun class (Essegbey 2009). The membership of the classes is based on morpho-syntactic properties such as class prefixes and subject-verb agreement with markers that are the same as pronominal forms. The two simple examples below illustrate this:

- (3a) *A-nyé* *a-bá*
 CM-man AM-come
 ‘The man has come’

² High, mid and contour tones are marked while low tone is left unmarked.

³ The following abbreviations are used: 1 = first person, 2 = second person, 3 = third person, AM = agreement marker, CM = class marker, DEF = definite, FUT = future, IDEO = ideophone, INT = intensifier, NEG = Negative, PREF = prefix, PL = plural, PROG = progressive, SG = singular, TP = terminal particle

- (3b) *Ba-nyé* *ba-bá*
 CM-man AM-come
 ‘The men have come.’

The initial consonant of CV prefix is more often than not deleted in conversational speech. Thus, *banyé babá* is spoken as *bany’ ábá*. In this paper, I represent the elicited sentences with the full components.

3. Data collection

Dingemans (2011) notes that while most languages may have a category that could be characterized as ideophones, the nature of that category needs to be established on language-internal criteria. He provides some phonological characteristics of ideophones for Siwu that, interestingly, appear similar to the ones that occur in Nyagbo. These are based on the length of the word, quality of the vowel, and nasalization. On word length, Dingemans writes that ideophones in Siwu are generally longer than other lexical categories like nouns and verbs. Ideophones usually have three or four syllables unlike nouns which mostly have two or three, and verbs which generally have one. On vowel quality, Dingemans writes that most of the ideophones in Siwu (80% to be precise) feature only one vowel throughout the word. He calls such ideophones “monovocalic” ideophones. A third property of the ideophones is that they are monotonal, which is to say they have one tone which is either high or non-high. Also, nasality, when present, is spread across the whole word. The four ideophones that I discuss in this paper are all monovocalic with all their vowels being oral. As such, the vowels obey the nasality restriction identified for the counterparts in Siwu. With the exception of *ekpedekpedé* which has a final high tone, all the remaining words are monotonal as well.

To obtain the ideophones I undertook a linguistic elicitation for texture vocabulary using the “texture booklet” developed by Majid et al (2007) at the Max-Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics (MPI), Nijmegen. The texture booklet is a standardized kit designed to elicit vocabulary for surface textures. It contains 10 pages each with a specific textured material. These are felt, beads, fur, jagged fabric, feather, plastic sheet, curved ridges (wide spacing), cork, rubber (yoga mat) and straight ridges with small spacing. Consultants are blindfolded and then made to feel the material with their fingers. They are then asked to tell how the material feels.

The texture booklet was tested with three Nyagbo consultants, referred to here as “Consultant 1” (23 years), “Consultant 2” (45 years), and “Consultant 3” (33 years). They were questioned by a native speaker who is referred to here as “Interviewer” (27 years). After all the consultants had described the material while blindfolded, they were brought together and made to see the materials, feel them again, and tell how they had describe the materials now that they could both see and feel them. In almost all the cases, their descriptions did not veer from the original one. The sessions were videotaped. While there were a few source-oriented responses, most of the responses were descriptive or, to be precise, depictive, centering on four ideophones, of which 2 were overwhelmingly used. For the purpose of this paper, I focus on these ideophones.

4. The ideophones

As stated in the preceding section, four ideophones were used to describe the ten materials in the texture booklet. They are considered in this section.

4.1. *Felt*

Two ideophones *hwahwalaá* ‘rough’ and *(kplɔ)kplɔplɔ* ‘smooth’ are used to describe the felt material. During the elicitation session with Consultant 1, he began by saying that the material is like a broom, upon which Interviewer asked him if the material is *hwahwalaá* ‘rough.’ After initially agreeing that it is, he said:

- (4) *Okay* ε -*ba-dɔ* $s\varepsilon$ *e-ti-dzi* *hwahwalaa* *fánō* (Consultant 1)
 Okay 1SG-FUT-say that 3SG-NEG-be rough too_much
- e-ti-dzi* *kplɔkplɔ* *fánō* *tsyé*
 3SG-NEG-be smooth too_much also
 ‘Well, I will say that it is not too rough, it is not smooth either.’

Consultant 2 also uses the exact same juxtaposition of *hwahwalaa* and *kplɔkplɔ*, in this case without prompting, while Consultant 3 talks rather about the source (i.e. it is like the skin of a sheep). It is clear from the descriptions of this material and others that I turn to presently that Nyagbo speakers treat *hwahwalaa* ‘rough’ and *kplɔkplɔ* ‘smooth’ as belonging to the same dimension; a texture that is neither too rough nor smooth lies somewhere between the two. When the consultants got together to discuss the material, Consultant 3 highlighted this by remarking:

- (5) ε -*ba-dɔ* $s\varepsilon$ *a-kpase* *bale* *ki-shi* (Consultant 3)
 1SG-FUT-say that 3SG-be_contained 3PL CM-middle
 ‘I would say that it is midway (between rough and smooth).’

The rough and smooth ideophones in Nyagbo are therefore so general that either can be used to describe the same texture. Note however that the description is one of degree wherein the texture is said to be not really smooth or rough.

4.2. Beads

The way in which the beads were described, when juxtaposed with the description of the felt material above, and that of other materials that we shall turn to presently, points to one characteristic manner of using texture ideophones in Nyagbo: rather than asserting that an object has property X or property Y, speakers rather say it is not property X. Consultant 1’s description of the beads illustrates this:

- (6) *Yε* *tsyé* *e-ti-dzi* *hwahwalaa* *tsyé* (Consultant 1)
 3SG also 3SG-NEG-be IDEO also
 ‘It is also not rough.’

An example like (6), when put together with (4), suggests that in a language which appears not to have many words to describe texture, asserting that a material does not possess a property is one strategy for doing so. NOT (P) where P is an ideophone which refers to rough or smooth would therefore represent one type of texture.

The beads also elicited a more definitive descriptive term, namely *ekpedekpedé*. *Ekpedekpedé* refers to roundedness:

- (7) *E-dzi* *ekpedekpedé* (Consultant 2)
 3SG-be IDEO
 ‘It is round.’

Since it refers to roundness, which is shape, sentence (7) suggests that Consultant 2, unlike Consultant 1, focused on the shape rather than the surface texture of the material. All three consultants chose *ekpedekpedé* when they met to discuss the material. At that time, not only could they feel the material but they could see it as well. Their preoccupation with the shape was therefore warranted.

According to the Nyagbo *ekpedekpedé* was formerly the word for ‘head’, and old people still use it for the same referent when they do not want foreigners to know what they are talking about. The beads are the only material that elicited this description.

4.3. Fur

Almost all the initial responses regarding the fur were source-oriented. That is to say the consultants were more interested in comparing the material to the thing with which one sleeps (blanket) or animal skin instead of really describing it. However, when they got together to look at it and describe it, one said that it is *kplɔkplɔ* ‘smooth.’

4.4. Jagged fabric

The jagged fabric material also elicited the rough and smooth words. In this case, rather than use the two words in the same sentence, one consultant uses a triplicated *kplɔkplɔkplɔ* as a modifier for the verb *yɔ̀* ‘become slippery’ while two use *hwahwalaa*:

(8a) *Ya tsyé yɛ abha a-yɔ̀* *kplɔkplɔkplɔ* (Consultant 1)
 3SG also 3SG top 3SG-become_slippery IDEO
 ‘It too, its surface is smooth.’

(8b) *Yɛ abha e-dzi hwahwalaa bɔ-bhlúí* (Consultant 2)
 3SG top 3SG-be IDEO CM-small

gaké a-ne kpákpá húnó
 But 3SG-NOT:be very_much rather
 ‘The surface is a little rough but not that much.’

When the three got together to discuss it, they said it is *hwahwalaa*.

4.5. Feather

Consultants 1 and 2 described this material as *kplɔkplɔ* ‘smooth’. Consultant 1’s description, which is given below, provides further information about the meaning of *kplɔkplɔ*: it also describes flour-like or powdery substances because of their extremely fine texture:

(9) *Yɛ abha a-lɛ kplɔkplɔkplɔ páá. Ahâ e-dzi* (Consultant 2)
 3SG top 3SG-be IDEO INT That’s_right 3SG-be

anse bɔná gɛ ba-lókɔ́ bhɔ́ buvu-ɔ
 like flour REL 3PL-take build house-TP
 ‘The surface is very smooth. Yes, it’s like flour that is used to build houses (i.e. cement).’

Consultant 3 did use *hwahwalaa* but when they all got together, they all described the feather as *kplɔkplɔ*. In addition to this ideophone, consultants 2 and 3 remarked on the fact that it is very soft, using the word *bɔbɔ* ‘be soft’ which is either borrowed from or has a cognate in Ewe.

4.6. Plastic (sheet)

The curious thing about the plastic sheet is that Consultant 1 described it with *hwahwalaa* together with the intensifier *páá* ‘very much.’ Consultants 2 and 3 use *kplɔkplɔ* instead, with Consultant 2 even including a borrowed word from Ewe:

(10) *Yɛ abha zɔ* (Consultant 2)
 3SG top be_smooth (Ewe)
 ‘The surface is smooth.’

Zrɔ is an Ewe word which means ‘to be smooth.’ Consultant 2 went on to use the word *kplɔkplɔ* and to compare the smoothness to that of a mirror. When the three got together to discuss it, they decided that it is *kplɔkplɔ*.

4.7. Curved ridges (wide spacing)

This is one of the few materials for which all the consultants used one ideophone at the outset, namely, *hwahwalaa*. Interestingly, the agreement on the choice of one word was not because the texture was extremely rough. In fact most of them sought to soften this characterization by saying it is not as rough as a previous one. Yet when they got together to discuss it, they re-asserted that only *hwahwalaa* would characterize it. Consultant 2 said:

- (11) *Hwahwalaa kón nɛ alé* (Consultant 2)
 IDEO INT be that
 ‘That is roughness indeed.’

4.8. Cork

In the description of this material, Consultant 1 said that is very *kplɔkplɔ*, using the two intensifiers *ɲútó* and *páá* both of which mean ‘very,’ and comparing it to a metal that has been sharpened. Consultants 2 and 3, by contrast, used *hwahwalaa* although both said it is not too rough. In this case when they all got together, Consultant 1 appeared to try to make a case for *kplɔkplɔ* but quickly agreed with the other two that it was *hwahwalaa*.

4.9. Rubber (yoga mat)

The rubber mat is one of only two materials that did not elicit the ideophone *hwahwalaa*. Instead it elicited *kplɔkplɔ* in addition to a new ideophone which focused on the toughness of the material. This new ideophone was used by Consultant 1:

- (12) *A-bhete tsutsuruu* (Consultant 1)
 3SG-make IDEO
 ‘It is tough.’

Note that *tsutsuruu*, like *ekpedekpedé* discussed in section 4.2, is not a surface texture word. However, all the four words we have encountered so far belong to haptic touch category (Dingemans and Majid 2012).

Consultants 2 and 3 noted that it is *kplɔkplɔ* but added that it is not too smooth. Consultant 2 who compared the smoothness of a plastic sheet to a mirror in section 4.6, actually said that this one is not as smooth as the mirror. When the three got together to discuss the texture, they still said it is *kplɔkplɔ* although Consultant 3, without mentioning *hwahwalaa*, added that it lies in between the two.

4.10. Straight ridges (small spacing)

This straight-ridges material elicited both *kplɔkplɔ* and *hwahwalaa*. In this case, Consultant 1 used *kplɔkplɔ* while consultant 2 also started by describing it as *kplɔkplɔ*, but then appeared to change his mind and said it was *hwahwalaa* instead. Consultant 3 stated that it was just slightly *hwahwalaa* and then went on to add the following:

- (13) *A-ge-bheté kplɔkplɔ fánɔ̄* (Consultant 3)
 3SG-NEG-make IDEO too_much
 ‘It is not too smooth.’

A-ge-bheté *hwahwalaa* *tsyé* *fan̄*
 3SG-NEG-make smooth also too_much
 ‘It is not too rough either.’

4.11. Discussion

The results of the elicitation provided above are summed up in table 1 below:

	<i>Kplɔkplɔ</i> ‘smooth’	<i>Hwahwalaa</i> ‘rough’	<i>Ekpɛkɛkɛ</i> ‘round’	<i>Tsutsuruu</i> ‘tough’
Felt	Not too X (2)	Not too X (2)		
Bead		Not (1)	Norm (2)	
Fur	Norm (1)			
Jagged fabric	Norm (1)	Not too X (1) Norm (1)		
Feather	Very (2)	Norm (1)		
Plastic sheet	Very (1)	Very (1) Norm (1)		
Curved ridges		Norm (2) Not too X (1)		
Cork	Very (1)	Not too X (2)		
Yoga mat	Not very X (1) Not too X (1)			Norm (1)
Straight ridges	Norm 1	Norm (2)		

Table 1. Uses of ideophones

The table shows that *ekpɛkɛkɛ* ‘round’ and *tsutsuruu* ‘tough’ which, as I have pointed out, do not express surface texture, are used to describe only one material each. In contrast, *kplɔkplɔ* and *hwahwalaa*, the true surface texture words, are used to describe almost all the materials. The only material that *kplɔkplɔ* is not used to describe are the beads, while the only ones not described with *hwahwalaa* are the fur and the yoga mat. One reason why *kplɔkplɔ* has such wider use is that in addition to expressing smoothness, it also expresses what one would characterize as fineness. The feather for instance is likened to cement powder by one consultant who described both as *kplɔkplɔ*. Note that rather than treating smoothness and fineness as two meanings, I consider *kplɔkplɔ* to be underspecified. The use of *kplɔkplɔ* is further increased when it is used to modify the word for slippery in (8a). In that instance it is triplicated.

The table shows the ideophones are presented either as a non-modified property which I refer to in the table as “norm” (it is X), an extreme property (it is very X), a not quite property (it is not too X), and a somewhat negative property (it is not X). In many cases rather than asserting that a material is

kplɔkplɔ or *hwahwalaa*, the consultants rather assert that it is not one or the other. It is clear from the way they are used that *kplɔkplɔ* and *hwahwalaa* are gradable oppositions. Lyons (1977: 272) writes:

With gradable oppositions, [the] predication of the one implies the predication of the negation of the other: the proposition “X is hot” implies “X is not cold”; and “X is cold” implies “X is not hot”. But “X is not hot” does not generally imply “X is cold” (although on occasions it may be interpreted in this way [...]).

What the above means is that when a consultant asserts a material is *hwahwalaa* (without qualification) or too *hwahwalaa*, then the one is asserting it is not *kplɔkplɔ*. However, when one asserts that the material is not *hwahwalaa*, that is not necessarily suggesting that they are *kplɔkplɔ*, although they could be somewhat *kplɔkplɔ*, or midway between *kplɔkplɔ* and *hwahwalaa*. This is why I have proposed that the two ideophones belong on a single dimension such that only the extremes, expressed with ‘very X,’ ‘too X,’ and ‘X,’ lie far away as to exclude each other. On the other hand, qualified properties such as ‘not too X’ and ‘not X,’ allow for the possibility that material could also be construed as ‘somewhat Y.’

5. Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to explore the semantics and use of ideophones that express texture. The words were elicited using the texture booklet designed by Majid et al (2007). As discussed in section 4, ideophones have peculiar length, vowel quality, tone, and nasality restriction. Thus all four words discussed on this paper are monovocalic. In terms of length, three of them are tri-syllabic while the fourth one, *ekpedekpedé*, has five syllables. Note that while it looks like a reduplicated word with a prefix, there is no word that is *kpedé* in Nyagbo. Another distinction between *ekpedekpedé* and the other ideophones is that the latter are all monotonal while the former has a high tone on the final syllable. This raises the issue whether *ekpedekpedé* is truly an ideophone. Further research into the uses of *ekpedekpedé* will determine this. For now, it should be noted that just like *tsutsuruu*, it is not used widely. One possible reason is that only the beads appear roundish among the materials we used.

I have noted that although *tsutsuruu* and *ekpedekpedé* are not surface texture words; they, together with *hwahwalaa* and *kplɔkplɔ*, belong to the category of haptic touch. The results of my elicitation show an overwhelming use of just two words, *hwahwalaa* and *kplɔkplɔ*. In a discussion of the semantic structure of sensory vocabulary in African languages, Dingemans and Majid (2012) note that on the level of graininess, Siwu has words that translate as ‘rough,’ ‘coarse-grained,’ and ‘fine-grained,’ while on the level of smoothness, it has a word that translates as ‘smooth’ and another that translates as ‘silky.’ If Nyagbo ever had such distinctions, they have disappeared. Instead only the two words *kplɔkplɔ* and *hwahwalaa* serve to express all these meanings. As a result, gradation strategies, such as the modifiers ‘very X,’ ‘not too X,’ and ‘not very X’ are used in addition to unqualified assertions.

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