

Expressiveness and system integration: on the morphosyntactic typology of ideophones

Many of the world's languages feature classes of marked words that depict sensory imagery, known as ideophones, mimetics or expressives (I use 'ideophones' as a cross-linguistic cover term). The relation between morphosyntax and ideophones is often negatively defined: they are said to display an antipathy towards questioning and negation (Kita 1997; Diffloth 1972) and to be structurally independent or "aloof" from clausal syntax. Against this, others have claimed that ideophones are in fact integrated in the sentence and that they are syntactically quite versatile (Tsujimura 2001; Newman 1968). In this paper I exploit cross-linguistic and corpus-based evidence to reconcile these apparently conflicting accounts of the morphosyntax of ideophones across languages.

The starting point of this paper is the fact that in Japanese, ideophones can be used in distinct grammatical functions (Hamano 1988; Kita 1997; Akita 2009), which differ not just in terms of syntax but also in terms of the expressive freedom they grant the ideophone. The basic argument will be is that the microvariation exhibited by the different syntactic functions can be exploited to gain a better understanding of the grammar of ideophones — both within Japanese and across languages. Comparing data from Japanese (Hamano 1988; Kita 1997; Akita 2009), Siwu (Dingemans 2011), and Somali (Dhoorre and Tosco 1998), I describe the range of syntactic functions assumed by ideophones (from stand-alone items to adverbial, nominal, adjectival, and verbal functions) and I document an inverse relation between the morphosyntactic integration and expressive features of ideophones. The generalisation is that the deeper an ideophone is integrated morphosyntactically, the more it behaves as an ordinary word; and conversely, the more independent an ideophone is, the more susceptible it is to expressive features like intonational foregrounding and expressive morphology.

To get a closer view of this trade-off, we need to observe it in natural speech. A comparative analysis of corpus data from Japanese and from Siwu (a Kwa language of eastern Ghana) motivates a functionally-based explanation linked to the prototypically performative nature of ideophones. In brief, the explanation involves three proposals: (1) that morphosyntactic independence goes with the occurrence of expressive features because the two work hand in hand to signal the depictive-performative nature of ideophones; (2) that morphosyntactic integration goes with a lack of expressive features because ideophones that are embedded essentially turn into ordinary descriptive words and cease to be depictive performances; and (3) that frequency of use is an important factor in the process through which ideophones become ordinary words that allow deeper morphosyntactic integration. Frequency data from both languages supports this proposal: in both Japanese and Siwu, the more frequently an ideophone is used, the more likely it is to occur in constructions with greater syntactic integration and less expressive freedom.

The corpus-based comparative analysis pursued in this paper shows that careful analysis of morphosyntactic microvariation in ideophone systems can help us to move away from simple categorical statements about ideophones towards a more scalar conception of the differentiation of syntactic and expressive functions of ideophones, both within and across languages. Ultimately, this will lead to better empirical grounding and increased descriptive sophistication in the cross-linguistic study of the grammar of ideophones, mimetics and expressives. (525 words)

References

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