Are ideophones really as weird and extra-systematic as linguists make them out to be?

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Scholars working on ideophones typically emphasize their peculiar phonological characteristics and their general linguistic aberrance as compared with a language's normal (= "prosaic") lexicon. It is of course true that ideophones are phonologically and semantically unusual in some way — if they weren't, they wouldn't have been identified as such and would not have attracted the attention of linguists, not only specialists in languages of Africa, where the term itself was first used (Doke 1935), but also linguists working on languages from other parts of the world (see, e.g., Hinton, Nichols, and Ohala 1994). The claim in this brief presentation is that scholars, attracted by the exoticism (or even "cuteness") of ideophones, have overemphasized the extent of their distinctiveness. Ideophones are somewhat different from prosaic words, but they are not "outré-système", i.e., they usually stretch the system of some language a bit, but they do not totally disregard it. How far ideophones deviate from the normal system will vary from language to language, in some cases more, in some languages less; but in the final analysis ideophones are part of the structure of a specific language and have to be viewed in the context of that language.

I shall illustrate this general point with examples from Hausa, a language whose ideophones have been the subject of numerous studies spanning almost a hundred years (see Prietze 1908; Galadanci 1971; Newman 1968, 2000).

1. Consonants

The first thing to note is that there are no consonants found in Hausa ideophones that are not part of the normal phonological inventory. (The only possible exception is *cwái* 'very sweet' with the labialized /d/, which presumably is a contraction of the coexisting variant *cákwaí*.)

[Transcription note:

- (i) *c* represents the *ch* sound in English 'church'.
- (ii) *ɾ* represents the tap/roll rhotic that contrasts with the flap, indicated with regular *r*.
- (iii) Long vowels are indicated by double letters.
- (iv) High tone is marked *á*; Low tone *à*; and Falling tone *â*. With long vowels, the tone is marked on the first vowel only, e.g., *áa*, *àa*, *âa*.]

Differences between ideophones and the prosaic lexicon primarily concern phonotactics. Most native Hausa words end in a vowel. There are some that end in a sonorant (liquid or nasal), but very few that end in an obstruent. Numerous ideophones, on the other hand, are consonant-final, e.g.,

(1) <i>tíkís</i>	'shows intensity of tiredness'
<i>túkúf</i>	'very old'
<i>tsít</i>	'in complete silence, hush'
<i>wúlík</i>	'emphasizes shiny black or deep blue'
<i>tsán-tsán</i>	'cautiously, securely tied'
<i>tsúlúm</i>	'sound of a small object falling in water'
<i>tsígl</i>	'emphasizes smallness'
<i>kàzàɾ-kázár</i>	'in an energetic manner'

Although word-final consonants are rare in prosaic vocabulary, syllable-final consonants within a word are not, i.e., CVC.CV is a normal canonical shape. There are, however, restrictions regarding which consonants can occur in syllable-final position and, interesting, these same restrictions apply to the word-final consonants found in ideophones. These shared restrictions include: (i) no phonation contrast; (ii) no palatal(ized) or labialized consonants; and (iii) no /h/ or /ʔ/.

As contrasted with native words or older loanwords from Arabic, many loanwords borrowed from English over the past century have a final consonant. The obstruents are limited to the same ones found in ideophones, e.g.,

(2) <i>kámbàs</i>	'tennis shoes' (< canvas)
<i>tēf</i>	'tape'
<i>fāamít</i>	'permit'
<i>ják</i>	'bicycle stand' (< jack)

In addition to utilizing the same basic inventory as prosaic words, ideophones also obey standard phonotactic restrictions, e.g., (i) no true consonant clusters (although two consonants can abut across a syllable boundary); (ii) two glottalized consonants may not co-occur in same word, except (a) one can have the same consonant twice (e.g., *kíikàm* (id.) 'indicates standing silently'; cf. *kwáakèè* 'fade'; and (b) one can get /d/ followed by /d/ (but not /d/ followed by /d/), e.g., *dúúdúm* (id.) 'emphasizes darkness', cf. *dáadíi* 'pleasantness'.

2. Vowels

Hausa has five vowels with long and short counterparts. Ideophones make use of exactly the same inventory, e.g.,

- (3) *kící-kící* 'making a serious effort'
búúú-bùùù 'long, unkempt (of hair)'
dàráa-dàràa 'bold and beautiful' (of eyes or writing)
zákéé-zákèè 'unsuitably long'
bátsóo-bàtsòò 'poorly made, ugly looking'

In the normal language, short /e/ and /o/ are limited to word-final position. A few ideophones violate this restriction. Examples (complete):

- (4) *fés* 'very clean'
sól 'emphasizes whiteness'
hóróo-hòròò 'unusually large opening' (esp. nostrils)

Ideophones are also limited to the two diphthongs found in the language, namely /ai/ and /au/, e.g., *wásái* (id.) 'emphasizes brightness', cf. *bákwài* 'seven'; *dákáu* (id.) 'emphasizes finely ground', cf. *kibáu* 'arrows'. (The otherwise non-occurring diphthong /oi/ is found in one word only, namely *cói* (= (and derived from) *cwái*) 'very sweet'.)

There are two points of difference between ideophones and prosaic words when it comes to diphthongs. First, in ideophones, diphthongs occur almost exclusively in word-final position, which is not the case with regular words where they often occur word-medially. Second, in ideophones, the diphthongs need to be analyzed as /aC/ sequences, i.e., /ay/ and /aw/, whereas in the prosaic language they pattern as long vocalic nuclei (Newman and Salim 1981).

3. Tone

Hausa has two level tones, H(igh) and L(ow), and a F(alling) tone, which only occurs on heavy syllables. (For most purposes, F can be thought of as a combination of H+L on a single syllable.) There is no rising tone. Ideophones make use of exactly these same tones. Two things are a bit unusual regarding word formation.

First, full reduplication in Hausa normally involves copying the tones along with the segmentals. This can be seen both in frozen reduplicative words, e.g., *kwàlé-kwàlé* 'canoe', *dóolì-dóolì* 'a myriapod', *kwáaná-kwáaná* 'fire truck', and in derived/inflected words, e.g., *mázá-mázá* 'very quickly' (intensive adverb < *mázá* 'quickly'); *wátàa-wátàa* 'monthly' (distributive formation < *wátàa* 'month'); *jóoji-jóoji* 'judges' (plural < *jóoji* 'judge'). ideophones, on the other hand, commonly

have a pattern in which each duple has a single level tone with the tones of the two halves being different, e.g.,

(5)	<i>búzúu-bùzùu</i> (H-L)	'long, unkempt' (of hair)
	<i>wújígáa-wùjígáa</i> (H-L)	'in a disheveled state'
	<i>cúkúu-cúkúu</i> (L-H)	'trying to obtain something in an underhanded way'
	<i>kàzàr-kázàr</i> (L-H)	'energetic nature' (of a person or animal), vigor, restlessness

Second, as observed many years ago by Leben (1971), it is extremely rare for Hausa words to end in L L tone and have a long final vowel. With ideophones, on the other hand, such occurrences are extremely common, e.g.,

(6)	<i>bútsúu-bùtsùu</i>	'untidy' (hair, clothes, arrangement of teeth)
	<i>bálóo-bàlòo</i>	'large and round' (fruits, pimples, or other liquid-containing things)
	<i>hàyàa-hàyàa</i>	'describes people's bustling about, talking back and forth'
	<i>dòosòosòo</i>	'emphasizes ugliness of face or dullness of person'
	<i>shèekèèkèè</i>	'contemptuously'

In other respects, however, the tonal behavior of ideophones is the same as that of prosaic words. For example, the Hausa "stabilizer" (FEM singular *cee*, not FEM singular *nee*), a grammatical particle found, inter alia, in identificational and equational sentences, has polar tone, i.e., H after L and L after H. This polarity is equally operative if the preceding item is an ideophone, e.g.,

(7)	<i>máakòo née</i> 'it's a week', cf.	<i>zágóo-zàgòo née</i> 'it's dense and rich' (eyebrows) (id.)
	<i>zòomóo nèe</i> 'it's a hare', cf.	<i>màkòo-mákóo nèe</i> 'it's miserly' (id.)

As mentioned above, final L L with a long final vowel is a disfavored sequence in Hausa. It is found, however, not only in ideophones but also in a small number of recent English loanwords such as *lóotàrèe* 'lottery'. The Sokoto dialect has undergone a regular sound change whereby the disfavored L L sequence has been replaced by L F. All words with the requisite shape have undergone the rule, whether ideophones or not, e.g.,

(8)	Standard Hausa	Sokoto	
	<i>sákàndàrèe</i>	<i>sákàndàrèe</i>	'secondary school'
	<i>támbùlàn</i>	<i>támbùlàn</i>	'drinking glass'
	<i>búzúu-bùzùu</i>	<i>búzúu-bùzúu</i>	'long and unkempt' (hair) (id.)
	<i>tsáláa-tsàlàa</i>	<i>tswáláa-tswáláa</i>	'long and skinny' (esp. legs) (id.)

4. Ideophones as reflections of the past

Because of their expressive, onomatopoeic-like character, ideophones are commonly viewed as ephemeral and as such are totally ignored in historical/comparative work. A close analysis of ideophones can, however, throw light on the linguistic past. I give two examples. Synchronically, /h/ and /ʔ/ are regular Hausa consonants. In polysyllabic ideophones having shapes like CVCVC or CVCV-CVCV, these consonants never occur word-medially as the C_2 . (The word *hànhái* 'wide opening', with /h/ in the second syllable, is an exception.) This gap provides further support for the analysis presented in Newman (1976) that /h/ and /ʔ/ historically developed fairly recently through phonemicization of what were originally phonetic manners of attack in vowel-initial words, i.e., $*\#ØV > \#hV$ or $\#ʔV$ (the choice of the guttural being determined by specific conditions irrelevant for the discussion here).

The fact that most ideophones are (and presumably were) consonant initial also explains why /h/ and /ʔ/, which derived from vowel-initial words, are also rare in initial position. But here, the situation with regard to /h/ as opposed to /ʔ/ is not parallel. Whereas ideophones with initial glottal stop are essentially non-existent, there are some with initial /h/, e.g., *hàm* 'emphasizes width of opening'; *hàyàa-hàyàa* 'describes people's bustling about, talking back and forth'; *hábáa-hábáa* 'shows cheerfulness, being warm with people'. What this suggests is that the phonemicization of /h/ and /ʔ/ may not have been simultaneous, as I had thought, but rather that /h/ may have become established earlier, a possible temporal sequence that did not emerge in the original study from which ideophones were excluded.

Falling tone occurs in only a dozen ideophones, mostly indicating the sound of something falling, e.g., *bùm* 'sound of something heavy falling', *fáu* 'sound of a slap or beating with a whip'. The rarity of F in ideophones is consistent with the notion that at an earlier historical period, Hausa had two level tones only, the Falling tone being a new addition resulting historically either from vowel loss with L tone preservation, e.g., *zôbbá* 'rings' ($< *zôobàbáa$) or from tone bending with H-tone, heavy-syllable, monosyllabic nouns, e.g., *mái* 'oil' ($< *mái < *már$) (see Newman 1992).

5. Lexical connections

Most Hausa ideophones are lexically autonomous in the sense that they exist as independent lexemes distinct from other words in the language. They simply exist in the Hausa lexicon as such, e.g.,

(9)	<i>fés</i>	'very clean'	<i>dòosdòosdò</i>	'emphasizes ugliness, dullness of person'
	<i>wùlík</i>	'shiny black or deep blue'	<i>sùmùmù</i>	'silently'
	<i>zìgídír</i>	'stark naked'	<i>bùtsúu-bùtsùu</i>	'untidy' (hair, clothes, teeth)

In some cases, however, one can spot a phonological connection between the ideophone and a semantically related noun or adjective, or, more often, verb. One doesn't have a productive rule of morphological formation, but one can see recurring patterns relating the prosaic and ideophonic word pairs like (a) final vowel omission, and (b) reduplication, e.g.,

(10)	a.	<i>bús</i> (= <i>bùs</i>)	cf.	<i>búsàa</i>
		'describes breaking through'		'break through'
		<i>cùnkús</i>	cf.	<i>cùnkùshée</i>
		'full of people or other countable entities'		'be crowded into'
		<i>dís</i>	cf.	<i>dísá</i>
		'sound of dripping'		'drip'
		<i>dándán</i>	cf.	<i>dánnèe</i>
		'firmly pressed'		'press down'
		<i>tsáy</i>	cf.	<i>tsáyàa</i>
		'still, pensively'		'stop, stand'
	b.	<i>bàdàdà</i>	cf.	<i>bàdí</i>
		'emphasizes years hence'		'next year'
		<i>búzuu-búzuu</i>	cf.	<i>búzurwáa</i>
		'long, unkempt (hair)'		'long-haired goat'
		<i>máláa-màlàa</i>	cf.	<i>máláalà</i>
		'describes minor flooding'		'flow out, flow over'
		<i>sákó-sákó</i>	cf.	<i>sákii</i>
		'loosely'		'let loose, release'
		<i>wará-wará</i>	cf.	<i>wáarèe</i>
		'spaced apart'		'separate, secede'

6. Grammatical relations

The most striking illustration of the integration of ideophones in the grammar of Hausa is found with augmentative adjectives (R.M. Newman 1988). These adjectives, which primarily refer to things that are exceedingly large (or stupid), contain a suffix of the form *-éeCèe* (FEM *-éeCiyáa*) where C is a copy of the preceding consonant, e.g., *gábjeéjèe/gábjeéjiyáa* 'huge (person)' (cf. the exclamation *gábji* 'how huge!'). Semantically, augmentatives tend to be expressive, almost slangy, but in terms of their morphology and syntax, they are ordinary run-of-the-mill adjectives. What is curious is that the plurals corresponding to the singular augmentatives

have to be considered ideophones. To begin with, they have a distinctive ideophonic shape namely (a) full reduplication marked by non-matching level tones on the two parts, and (b) final L L with a long final vowel, e.g., *gábzáa-gàbzàa* 'huge (people)'. (Note: the /z/ seen here is underlying; in the singular, the /j/ represents palatalization due to the following front vowel.) Unlike the singular augmentatives, which typically occur pre-nominally (with a gender-sensitive linker), e.g., *firdéedèn dóokii* 'a very large, strong horse', *sántáléeliyár búdurwáa* 'a slender good-looking young lady', the corresponding plurals invariably occur after the noun, e.g., *dáwáakii firdáa-firdàa* 'huge horses'; *yámmaatáa sántáláa-sàntàlàa* 'slender good-looking girls'. Examples:

- (11) *gánsamémèè/gánsaméemiyáa* (MASC/FEM)
gánsamáà-gànsàmàa (ID/PL) 'tall and stout'
ribdédèè/ribdédiyáa (MASC/FEM)
ribdàa-ribdàa (ID/PL) 'huge and bulky'
shártábéebèè/shártábéebiyáa (MASC/FEM)
shártábáa-shàrtàbàa (ID/PL) 'long, sharp'
tsaaléelèè/tsaaléeliyáa (MASC/FEM)
táaláa-tsàalàa (ID/PL) 'svelte'
zúngúrèèè/zúngúréeriyáa (MASC/FEM)
zúngúráa-zùngùràa (ID/PL) 'long, tall'

7. Conclusion

In many African languages — not to mention Asian or native American languages — ideophones constitute an extremely rich and important part of the language's lexicon and expressive potential. These words typically have distinctive phonological characteristics and highly marked semantics. Nevertheless, in focusing on what is different about ideophones, scholars have tended to overlook the simple notion that to a great extent ideophones are part and parcel of whatever language they belong to. Ideophones in Gbeya (Samarin 1966), for example, may have some aberrant properties, but they can still be identified as Gbeya, and not Ewe or Kisi or Zulu or Malay or Hmong or Korean or Quechua, or what have you. In this paper, I have demonstrated how ideophones in Hausa are on the one hand like and on the other hand unlike words in the normal prosaic language. I have shown that the treatment of ideophones *within* the basic structure of Hausa is essential both synchronically and historically.

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