Ideophones
at the intersection of theory and methods in African linguistics

Mark Dingemanse
Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, Nijmegen

43rd Annual Conference on African Linguistics
March 2012, Tulane University, New Orleans
it holds itself together

sinisinisinisinisinisinisinisinisinisi

‘closely woven’
it shines

κέλενκέλεν

‘glittery’
"perform"
"enact"
marked words that depict sensory imagery

Dingemanse 2011
“the lunatic fringe of language”
Frankis 1991

“the lexicographer’s worst nightmare”
De Schryver 2009

“a step-child of modern linguistic science”
Voeltz & Kilian-Hatz 2001
“Ideophones can be highly variable and difficult to elicit away from the field … They do not regularly show up in written texts … In traditional elicitation sessions, native speakers will have great difficulty in explaining the meaning of an ideophone…”

Tucker Childs, 1994
traditional "pencil and paper" work
specially designed field tasks
recordings
of everyday social life
Language and perception
fieldwork in the ideophonic heartland of West-Africa on Siwu, spoken by 12,000 people in Kawu, Ghana

na-Togo < GTM < Kwa (Heine 1968, Blench 2006)
Monellin and thaumatin are two intensely sweet proteins extracted from African berries. These proteins are ~ 100,000 times sweeter than sugar on a molar basis and several thousand times sweeter on a weight basis. (Kim et al., *Protein Engineering*, 1989)

ìpòfa
*Thaumatococcus Danielii*, Katemfe or “miracle fruit” (Daniell 1855)

kàmërëmërë́í
*Dioscoreophyllum cumminsii* or “serendipity berry” (Inglett & May 1968)
nyēkēnyēkē “intensely sweet”

language & the environment are closely intertwined

ideophones target very specific sensory perceptions
three problems

1. comparability
2. capturing elusive meanings
3. analysts’ vs. speakers’ intuitions
problem 1 comparability

“We have hardly begun to study the classification of human experience revealed by ideophones”

William Samarin, 1965
Stimulus-based elicitation tasks
6 tasks, 130+ stimulus items
Majid & Levinson 2007, see fieldmanuals.mpi.nl
example

touch task item #1, *piece of felt*

1. *wùrùfùù* ‘fluffy’ 5x
2. *wòsòròò* ‘rough’ 4x
3. *fǔũfǔũ* ‘malleable’ 3x

*i-se wòsòròò gàke wùrùfùù anaà*
im- be IDPH.rough but IDPH.malleable too
‘it is *wòsòròò* [smooth] but also *wùrùfùù* [fluffy]’
Results for 14 participants for all six tasks
Dingemanse 2011

- Texture
- Taste
- Colour
- Shape
- Sound
- Smell

Legend:
- Ideophone
- Other Abstract
- Source
- Evaluative
1. ideophones can be elicited
2. stimulus-based elicitation gives us comparability
problem 2
capturing elusive meanings

“Ideophones are not like normal words to which meanings are readily assigned”
Isidore Okpewho, 1992
folk definitions
video-recorded informal explanations in the language under study

Dingemanse 2010

60 ideophones explained in Siwu data from 4 different speakers (m/f)
gestures
example sentences
antonyms and synonyms
cultural background information
example

gìgìgìlì vs. minimini ‘roundness’

gilìgìli  ‘circular’ (round, 2D)
minimimi  ‘spherical (round, 3D)
1. gesture sheds light on the imagistic meanings of ideophones
2. offers crucial evidence in many areas
   information structure
   motion & manner verb semantics
   serial verb constructions & event representation
   semantics & pragmatics of demonstratives
problem 3
analysts’ vs. speakers’ intuitions

“Our knowledge of ideophones ... is in part defective because the choice to record them reflects the worldview of the compiler”

Roger Blench, 2010
classifying the meanings of ideophones

1. Doke 1935: “manner, colour, sound, smell, action, state or intensity”
   • why these 7 domains? (cf. Westermann 1927, “all sensory perceptions”)

2. Alexandre 1966: “auditive, visual, tactile, gustative, and olfactive” (i.e. the five senses)
   • is this Western folk model of perception applicable? (sensory science finds a much larger taxonomy, e.g. Moller 2002)

3. Samarin 1966: “appearance, arrangement, emotion, measure, motion, odour, quality, shape, sound, state, taste, temperature, time, touch, and weight”
   • are these English distinctions universal? (cf. Malt et al. 1999, 2011 on words vs. concepts)
capturing speakers’ intuitions with a sorting task
Salient dimensions found in psychophysics research:
rough-smooth, hard-soft, springiness, sticky-slipperiness, and firmness (Bhushan et al. 1997)

Salient dimensions identified through the sorting task:
rough-smooth, hard-soft, malleability, slipperiness, firmness

Features of an industry-developed touch lexicon:
abstract (not source-based) items, uniformity in linguistic resources (Guest et al. 2010)

Design features of ideophones:
abstract (not source-based) items, usually a fairly uniform lexical class
1. sorting tasks empirically capture native speaker intuitions
2. shed light on the organisation of the mental lexicon
3. reveal that ideophones may rival industry-designed sensory lexica
summary so far
0. random forest outings for serendipity
1. elicitation tasks for systematic sampling
2. folk defs & gesture for insight into semantics
3. sorting tasks for capturing native intuitions
Using ideophones
“Ideophones are part of an informal language register, and their function is to dramatize a narration.”

Kilian-Hatz 2001
(and Burbidge 1938, Doke 1948, Jungraithmayr 1983, etc.)
problem 4
our dataset is skewed
A corpus of naturally occurring *everyday speech* 

3000+ utterances across 30+ episodes 

1 in 12 utterances contains an ideophone
assessment sequences
Pomerantz 1984, Heritage & Raymond 2005

A  T's tsuh beautiful day out isn't it?  (JS:II:28)
B  Yeh it's jus' gorgeous...

Assessment sequences involve the management of knowledge and information: who knows what, who has access to the thing assessed, who agrees with whom, etc.
When you sieve the gunpowder, it’ll be *kɛlɛnkɛlɛnkɛlɛnkɛlɛnkɛlɛnkɛlɛnkɛlɛn*! You’ll see it for yourself.

It’ll go *gelegelegelegelegele*!

Indeed. It’ll shine just like that.
ideophones are appeals to direct experience

1. good for emphasizing *shared experience*  
   (e.g. communal stories, co-constructive)

2. good for stressing *epistemic authority*  
   (e.g. expert knowledge, competitive)

Dingemanse 2011b
1. some functions of ideophones can only be seen if you look beyond narrative

2. this invites comparison to other devices for *epistemics in interaction*
   - evidentials (Chafe & Nichols 1986, Aikhenvald 2004)
   - reported speech (Holt 1996; Clift 2006)
Conclusions
ideophones challenge us
to understand African sensory worlds
to never lose sight of visual language
to study everyday language use
Ideophones “illuminate things so that people will see and learn.”

(àkparara ara so máanyà nɛ màdji ite)
I thank
the Mawu people
the ACAL organizers
European Research Council
Max Planck Society for the Advancement of Science

email  mark.dingemanse@mpi.nl
visit  thesis.ideophone.org
references and other supplementary materials at thesis.ideophone.org