Introduction
Ideophones: Between grammar and poetry

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It has been said that “the study of ideophones is coming of age” (Dingemanse 2012:654), making this Special Issue of Pragmatics and Society very timely. Ideophones are an interesting class of words that appear in many, if not all, of the world’s languages, spoken in places ranging from India to Latin America, from Japan to Africa. The reason we can identify specific areas of the world as having languages that use ideophones is that in these specific regions ideophones are a large lexical class with its own highly marked patterns of morphology and phonology. Other languages, including many European languages, have fewer ideophones with less elaborate grammatical patterns. Ideophones are always marked (Dingemanse 2012:655ff.). This marking can be phonological (lengthened vowels, different syllabic structures, etc.), morphological (morphological patterns like reduplication that don’t occur elsewhere in a language), or syntactic (the ideophone being isolated by a pause, resisting inflectional endings, etc.). This markedness makes ideophones stand out in the speech stream, allowing for what is possibly the most fascinating aspect of the ideophone: its performativity.

Ideophones “assault” the senses, demanding them to participate in the experience they express” (Kulemeka 1995). This sensory assault involves both production and perception. Because ideophones often involve unusual phonological patterns, their iconic nature is reproduced in the actual physical production of the word (see Diffloth 1979). Ideophones have a noticeably ‘histrionic’ character: the person who pronounces an ideophone is performing (Voeltz et al. 2001:3). This element of performance surely explains why gestures often accompany the pronunciation of ideophones (Nuckolls 1999:243; Dingemanse, this issue). Using an ideophone is an event, not just a way to communicate. This performatve aspect of the ideophone has been called depiction (Dingemanse 2012:655). Internal to the speaker, the ideophone brings out in public something s/he is experiencing or has experienced, so that other people may also know it through experience. In the
words of Anthony Webster’s Navajo informants, ideophones “give an imagination to the listener” (Webster, this issue).

Given that ideophones are marked depictions, the question remains what are they marked depictions of? As with their form, the meaning of ideophones is narrow and specific. They are generally thought of as iconic words whose meaning is their form, their sound. All onomatopoeia is ideophonic, but ideophony is much broader than onomatopoeia. In fact, sound-imitative words form an uninteresting minority of ideophonic words (Dingemanse 2012:659). Also, the iconicity of ideophones does not have to be a matter of a sound imitating a particular sound. It can be a sound imitating a movement, visual patterning, other sensory perceptions (smells, tactile feelings), inner feelings, and even cognitive states. When we get to ideophones depicting things like ‘unable to decide’ in Korean, the idea of iconicity needs to be refined. The listener interprets them as direct, unmediated, ‘iconic’ depictions of what is being expressed, but externally the similarity might not be obvious. Ideophones’ meaning is also limited inasmuch as they always depict sensory experience, from the sound of a cuckoo to the feeling of not being able to decide. It is unclear why the meaning of ideophones is so limited, but it probably has to do with their immediacy: they are immediate words that depict immediate knowledge (sensations).

Western scholars have known about ideophones since at least the seventeenth century (Dingemanse 2010). The phenomenon has been described using a number of terms including “expressive/iconic”, “affecto-imagistic,” “performative,” “mimesis,” “Lautbilder” (‘vocal images’) and “sound gestures” or “oral gestures” (Dingemanse 2012:655; Diffloth 1972; Kita 1979; Nuckolls 1995; Güldemann 2008; Поливанов 1916). Credit for coining the term ideophone is given (possibly incorrectly) to Clement Martyn Doke (1935), who used the term in reference to these kinds of words in the Bantu languages of Africa. This is also the term we are using in the present Special Issue, but we could just as well call them ‘sound gestures,’ emphasizing their performative character.

Because of their ability to ‘reproduce’ sensory experiences, ideophones lie at the border between grammatical structure and cultural expression. Since ideophones involve both grammar and cultural expression, any attempt to develop a typology of ideophones must involve discussion of more than grammatical structure (see Samarin 1965; Dingemanse 2012). The articles in the present issue thus approach ideophones both in terms of their importance in grammar and of their poetic potential. The first three contributions (by Childs, Nuckolls, and Dingemanse) focus on issues more closely related to grammar, while the last three (by Barrett, Lahti, and Webster) emphasize the use of ideophones in poetry. A final contribution by Sicoli sums up the findings of the volume and connects them with ideas on iconicity derived from the works of Charles S. Peirce.
The first three articles stress the theoretical importance of ideophones’ position along the boundary between grammar and expression. The relative lack of attention that ideophones have received in linguistic research results, in part, from the performative character of ideophones, which allows them to be ignored as being somehow “outside” of language (see Childs, this issue). The articles presented here demonstrate that, as part of language, ideophones have important theoretical implications for the field of linguistics.

In the article, “Constraints on violating constraints: How languages reconcile the twin dicta of ‘Be different’ and ‘Be recognizably language,’” Tucker Childs considers the ways in which ideophones negotiate the boundary between expressiveness and grammar. Childs describes the ways in which ideophones reconcile the need to be different from the language around them with the need to be recognizable as forms of language themselves. Considering primarily examples from Zulu and other African languages, Childs finds that ideophones are marked as expressive through infrequent use, indeterminacy, by promoting negation and involvement, and as occurring through a multimodal, robust signal. Although ideophones are marked as different and expressive, they remain recognizable as forms of language by exploiting formal resources that are less central in the grammar, by showing links with other words in the language, and by limiting violations of grammatical rules. Childs provides an important and useful framework for considering the relationship between expressivity and grammar, and proposes new directions for future research on ideophones.

The next article, “Ideophones’ challenges for typological linguistics: the case of Pastaza Quichua”, by Janis Nuckolls, examines the implications of ideophones for theories of verb typology. Although Quichua ideophones are technically adverbs, they contribute crucial semantic content to the verb because of their performative power. Nuckolls reports on a survey of ideophone/verb collocations in Quichua. The results of this survey reveal problems with the underlying assumptions in theories of the typology of motion verbs. Nuckolls outlines the patterns of a variety of ideophone/verb collocations which demonstrate that ideophones do much more than encode ‘manner of motion’ (as often presumed in typological studies). In particular, theories of motion verb typology privilege the finite verb over other parts and aspects of grammar (such as the adverbial role of ideophones). In addition, Nuckolls finds that Quichua poses major problems for theories presuming an “economy of effort” associated with motion verbs. Nuckolls’ article provides an excellent example of how the pragmatic features of ideophones raise important questions for linguistic theory.

In the third article, “Making new ideophones in Siwu: creative depiction in conversation,” Mark Dingemanse examines cases of spontaneous ideophones that occur in natural language. It has long been noted that spontaneously created
ideophones do occur, but Dingemanse provides the first detailed study of exactly how they are formed and understood by participants in an interaction. And even though creative ideophones are entirely new, they are constrained by patterns within the language, allowing for them to be recognized by participants in a particular interaction. For example, although creative ideophones are phonologically marked, they are marked in ways that are shared with pre-existing ideophones. Like the articles by Childs and Nuckolls, Dingemanse’s contribution provides important insights into the ways in which ideophones walk a fine line between expression and language.

The last three articles are about ideophones in K’iche’, Russian, and Navajo poetry, each focusing on the work of one poet: Humberto Ak’abal, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and Rex Lee Jim respectively (these articles were originally presented together at the 2010 Kentucky Foreign Language Conference). The authors were very excited about the commonalities in the papers and went ahead and organized the panel at the Linguistic Society of America Convention (2012) at which all the other articles in this Special Issue of *Pragmatics and Society* were presented. We are so happy to see the cross-fertilization continue!

Rusty Barrett’s “Ideophones and (non-)arbitrariness in the K’iche’ poetry of Humberto Ak’abal” is a treatment of one K’iche’ poet’s use of ideophones in his work. The article begins, however, with an overview of ideophones in all the twenty eight Mayan languages and then moves on to give a full set of ideophonic affixes in K’iche’. Taking a very broad view, Barrett defines the writing of lyric poetry, such as Ak’abal’s, as an important part of the ‘Maya Movement’ that began roughly in the 1980s and represents a sort of cultural renaissance for the Mayan people. Turning to Ak’abal’s poetry, Barrett looks at how the poet uses ideophones to facilitate expression in his poetry, then turns to Ak’abal’s so-called “sound poems” that are made up entirely of ideophonic roots that can, by themselves, have no morphosyntactic relationship to one another. The poem with the Spanish title *Tormenta* (‘Storm’) is made up of ideophones for “sound of thunder,” “sound of strong, steady rain,” “sound of a spring waterfall” and “sound of sprinkling water.” These words are lengthened and repeated to form a poetic pattern. Lastly, Barrett discusses a poem by Ak’abal that is composed of the names of birds that Ak’abal reads aloud in live performances as if their names were birdcalls, making ideophones out of regular words.

In “Ideophones in Vladimir Mayakovsky’s work,” Katherine Lahti treats how the Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky also regularly made common words into ideophones. This is following her two discoveries: one, that Mayakovsky writes a lot about sound in general in his poems, and two, that Mayakovsky’s poems can be divided into visual- and sound-oriented sections. Turning to a poem in which the poet shouts out “O-HO-HO,” she makes the important point that
ideophones always include the meaning of the fact of their own pronunciation. She sums up her discoveries by saying that Mayakovsky’s very voice was ideophonic, and, indeed, this class of words is very frequent in his verse. Lahti concludes with suggesting reasons for Mayakovsky’s abundant use of ideophones: maybe the poet was pretending to be a ‘primitive’ at the time, maybe it was because of his close relationship with the linguist Roman Jakobson, or perhaps because at the time, all his friends were writing in zaum (a Russian neologism denoting ‘transrational’ language), while he also wanted to be using words that were rooted in sound and featured a particular emotional expressiveness.

Like Rusty Barrett’s article, Anthony Webster’s contribution “Rex Lee Jim’s ‘Naasts’opso’; On Iconicity, Interwoven-ness, and Ideophones” begins with an overview of issues in the Navajo language, in particular that of ideophones. He then discusses contemporary written Navajo poetry that uses ideophony, and especially Rex Lee Jim’s poetry. Turning to one poem by Jim, Webster argues that Jim’s use of an ideophone in its myriad forms (from nominalized noun to independent ideophone to verb stem) creates an interwoven-ness across lines that evokes an iconicity of sound and sense. Toward the end of the article, he discusses the use of Navajo ideophony in literacy education and in competing views about the appropriateness of using ideophony in Navajo written literature. Here, some people believe that ideophones are not appropriate for literature, and Webster suggests that this may be a case of “textual genocide.”

The final article, “Ideophones, Rhemes, and Interpretants” by Mark Sicoli, reviews the articles in this collection and his own work on sound symbolism in Mesoamerican languages. Sicoli uses the articles in this Special Issue to examine the very nature of ideophones as linguistic signs. Sicoli considers the position of ideophones within Charles Sanders Peirce’s theory of signs to provide further insight on the ways in which ideophones problematize our understandings of the relationship between language and pure expression.

This Special Issue of Pragmatics and Society on ideophones provides a needed entry into coming to terms with their sound-symbolic, grammatical, and culturally expressive forms. As the articles in the present issue clearly demonstrate, ideophones need to be studied within the whole of their sociocultural and linguistic ranges of use. Ideophones evoke meanings and feelings within context; they stand, then, as a testament to the pragmatic basis of all language. The articles in the present issue also remind us of the importance of attending not just to symbols (following the terminology of Peirce), but to iconicity as well – especially iconicity from the interpreter’s perspective. Linguistic theories predicated on a narrowly referentialist view of language are found wanting when the attention is on ideophones and other iconic forms of languages. We do damage both to languages and expressive forms when we ignore ideophony. The articles in this Special Issue
seek to recognize the complexity of languages as human practice through our discussions of this particular phenomenon. Rather than being ‘pre-linguistic,’ ideophony challenges us to be more creative in the ways that we imagine languages. We also, finally, pay tribute to the poets and speakers who take such delight in ‘assaulting’ our senses through their use and practices of ideophony.

References


