

## Folk definitions in linguistic fieldwork

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Informal paraphrases by native speaker consultants are crucial tools in linguistic fieldwork. When recorded, archived, and analysed, they offer rich data that can be mined for many purposes, from lexicography to semantic typology and from ethnography to the investigation of gesture and speech. This paper describes a procedure for the collection and analysis of folk definitions that are native (in the language under study rather than the language of analysis), informal (spoken rather than written), and multi-modal (preserving the integrity of gesture-speech composite utterances). The value of folk definitions is demonstrated using the case of ideophones, words that are notoriously hard to study using traditional elicitation methods. Three explanatory strategies used in a set of folk definitions of ideophones are examined: the offering of everyday contexts of use, the use of depictive gestures, and the use of sense relations as semantic anchoring points. Folk definitions help elucidate word meanings that are hard to capture, bring to light cultural background knowledge that often remains implicit, and take seriously the crucial involvement of native speaker consultants in linguistic fieldwork. They provide useful data for language documentation and are an essential element of any toolkit for linguistic and ethnographic field research.

### 1. Introduction

Bronislaw Malinowski, in his seminal work on the problem of meaning in undescribed languages (1923), relates how he once missed an opportunity to record unique ethnographic and linguistic material on the Trobriand Islands simply because he relied on a mistranslated deictic verb. Interpreting an utterance as “they have already arrived” (instead of “they have started moving hither”), he interrupted his recordings in the village, packed his equipment, and rushed off to the waterfront, only to find nobody there.

Problems of translation can occur in any multilingual situation, but they are especially pressing in linguistic field research, where at least some and at worst all of the stages of data collection, analysis, description and comparison happen

in a language other than the one under investigation. Such problems include at least the following (Werner 1993; Dimmendaal 1995; Ameka 2008; Hellwig 2010): various processes of calquing and replacing of categories may occur; literal translations can be very different from culturally appropriate translations; semantic distinctions may be lost or obscured; and semantic categories may be reshaped when we work through the filter of another language. There will never be easy solutions to those problems, but being aware of them, we can design our methods of data collection and analysis accordingly. One important conclusion that Malinowski himself drew from his fieldwork was “that language is essentially rooted in the reality of the culture, the tribal life and customs of a people, and that it cannot be explained without constant reference to these broader contexts of verbal utterance” (1923: 304). This chapter discusses the collection and analysis of folk definitions as one way of attending to these broader contexts.

Folk definitions attenuate the problem of translation because they prioritise the language under study over a language of analysis. As rich records of native speaker knowledge, they are a valuable form of language documentation and they provide data that can be used for various purposes, be it lexicography, semantic typology, or ethnography. Folk definitions gained prominence in a relatively brief period associated with ethnoscience and cognitive anthropology (Weinreich 1962; Casagrande & Hale 1967; Perchonock & Werner 1969; Franklin 1971; Mathiot 1967, 1979), but were all but forgotten afterwards; they make no appearance in recent reference works on linguistic and anthropological fieldwork (Newman & Ratliff 2001; Bernard 2006; Chelliah & Reuse 2011). Perhaps the tide is turning: native speaker paraphrases are briefly discussed in Bower’s textbook on fieldwork (2007: 110) and are used to great effect in Kockelman’s work on Q’eqchi’ (2010). One goal of this chapter is to reaffirm the relevance of folk definitions as a tool for language description and documentation.

This chapter demonstrates the use of folk definitions through research on ideophones. Ideophones are marked words that depict sensory imagery (Dingemans 2012). Examples are *mukumuku* ‘mumbling mouth movements’, *petepete* ‘thin and fragile’, and *kpɔtɔɔ-kpɔtɔɔ* ‘walk like a tortoise’ in Siwu, a na-Togo (Kwa) language spoken in Eastern Ghana. Ideophones occur in many of the world’s languages, but are especially known from sub-Saharan African languages (Voeltz & Kilian-Hatz 2001). The rich semantic detail of these words has been singled out for comment by many authors (Samarin 1967a; Diffloth 1972), and is often presented as a challenge for lexicography and translation (Childs 1993; Noss 1999; Nuckolls 2000; Lydall 2000). With meanings that are elusive and hard to pin down in traditional elicitation sessions (Mithun 1982; Childs 1994a), ideophones offer an ideal test case for the use of folk definitions in linguistic description and analysis.

## 2. Folk definitions

A fundamental task in field linguistics is to characterize the meanings ascribed to linguistic items. Field linguists have developed various ways to go about this, including different types of elicitation (free, questionnaire-based, and stimulus-based), deduction from examples and texts, and more psychologically oriented methods like semantic differentials and sorting tasks (Samarin 1967b; Bouquiaux & Thomas 1992; Payne 1997; Hellwig 2006; Bernard 2006; Bown 2007; Crowley 2007; Dixon 2007; Chelliah & Reuse 2011). In addition to using various combinations of these methods, many field linguists also rely on informal paraphrases by their consultants (Silverstein 1981; Everett 2001; Kockelman 2010). Such paraphrases provide usage examples and bring to light semantic relations as well as cultural background knowledge. One reason paraphrases or folk definitions are such a useful method is that they are experience-near to native speaker consultants. Everyday language use offers many occasions in which speakers are prompted to explain a word or say the same thing in a different way – from explications in language learning (Garvey 1977) to clarifications in conversational repair (Schegloff, Jefferson & Sacks 1977; Dingemanse, Blythe & Dirksmeyer 2014). Folk definitions tap into such natural explanatory routines.

Usually, native speakers' paraphrases are treated as fleeting phenomena on the way from one point in the research process (the linguistic item or system under analysis) to the next (a semantic description or a typological generalisation). Yet it is perfectly possible to record such paraphrases in a systematic way. If this is done, they provide for rich records of linguistic and cultural data that are close to native speakers' intuitions. It is these informal paraphrases, recorded and available for repeated inspection, that we call *folk definitions*. Folk definitions are native, informal, multi-modal explanations of linguistic items.

*Native.* The explanations are produced in the native language of the consultants, rather than in the metalanguage. This has two important benefits. First, the dubious but necessary step of translation into a metalanguage (usually some variety of Standard Average European) is postponed until after the process of data collection. The data of course will be much the richer for it. Second, the pool of potential consultants includes everyone with communicative competence in the language under study, whether young or old, literate or illiterate, monolingual or multilingual.

*Informal.* The folk definitions are produced and recorded in an informal setting in which speakers feel at home. They may well include hesitations, restarts, and reformulations, hitches that are not seen as performance errors but as sources of information, making visible how speakers navigate their knowledge of language and culture to explicate the use of linguistic items. They are produced in a

spontaneous way without much forethought, thus revealing the associations and explanations that are most typical of everyday face-to-face interaction.

*Multi-modal.* Folk definitions are produced as series of composite utterances: communicative moves integrating verbal and visual channels (Enfield 2009). The facial expressions, gestures, and enactments that speakers use also contribute to the semantics and pragmatics of the items under investigation. While some analyses may abstract away from this by focussing on certain aspects (e.g. the use of synonyms and antonyms; the types of gestures used), the integrity of the primary data should always be kept in mind and can be harnessed for powerful insights.

Two types of folk definitions can be distinguished based on the mode of collection. Following Manes (1980), *list definitions* are elicited from consultants based on a list of words to be defined, while *contextualised definitions* are those that occur naturally in the course of everyday conversations, for instance following requests for clarification. Although contextualised definitions are a regular feature of everyday conversations, they tend to be one-offs that are hard to collect in a field situation except as bycatch in the larger process of building a corpus of spontaneous interaction. Manes (1980) compared contextualised definitions for English words to list definitions elicited for Papago words by Casagrande and Hale (1967), and found that the strategies used to define words are basically the same. It is likely that list definitions are structurally similar to contextualised definitions.

List definitions can be recorded in dedicated sessions and can easily be collected from multiple speakers. Frames to elicit folk definitions can be constructed in any language along the lines of questions like “Can you explain \_\_\_ to me?” or “Can you tell me what \_\_\_ means?” (Werner 1993). The present study uses list definitions of a collection of sixty ideophones, elicited from four speakers of Siwu. The speakers are Foster, a man in his 40s; Ruben, a man in his 60s; Beatrice, a woman in her 50s; and Ella, a woman in her 50s. The speakers were recorded independently of each other in informal settings. Foster was recorded in 2007; Ruben in 2008; and Beatrice and Ella in 2009.

Although the term “folk definition” has the merit of connecting us to a prior literature, “definition” may have an overly technical connotation. Folk definitions are best thought of as lay explanations. They do not measure up to the lexicographer’s ideal of both characterizing and delimiting the meaning of a given term, but this is less of a problem than it might seem. The reason is that naïve speakers are natural Wittgensteinians: their explanations feature contextualised examples of typical uses, bits of encyclopedic knowledge, and semantically similar or contrastive items. This is precisely the kind of evidence about linguistic items available to everyday users of language, and therefore of great use to the analyst. Moreover, the significance of folk definitions goes beyond their use as an analytic tool; they also have great value as documentary records of native speaker knowledge.

### 3. Folk definitions of ideophones

To get started, let us take a look at four typical examples. In these transcripts, gestures are marked by † Gx †, where *x* indexes a description given below the interlinear representations.

**Extract 1.** Folk definition of *yààà* ‘gushing’ by Ruben<sup>1</sup>

1 R *ndu se yàà:*

water go IDPH.gushing:EM

† G1 †

Water is gushing *yààà*.

2 *gɔ kàdo pɛ, ñgɔ ndu se yààà mi-bò àyo amɛ*

when rain beat, how water go IDPH.gushing SCR-enter houses inside

† G2 † † G3 †

When it has rained, the way the water gushes *yààà*, entering the houses.

... (three lines omitted)

6 *mì-se kere yààà wààà*

SCR-go just IDPH.gushing IDPH.splash

† G4 †

It just goes *yààà* [gushing] *wààà* [splashing]

7 *mì-se i kàkɔi biara kekè*

SCR-go LOC place each every

† G5 †

it goes into every place.

G1: right hand flat, moves from upper right down to alongside body depicting flow of water

G2: right hand pointing gesture to the sky

G3: both hands flat, palm down, swiftly moving horizontally depicting violent flow of water

G4: both hands flat, palm down, moving and meandering horizontally while body is turning

G5: multiple pointing gestures with both hands

“Water goes *yààà* [gushing]. When it has rained, the way the water goes *yààà*, entering the houses. ... It just goes *yààà* [gushing] *wààà* [splashing] into every place.”

1. Abbreviations: ADJ adjectival marker, EM expressive morphology, G gesture, IDPH ideophone, INTJ interjection, NEG negative, O object marker, PL nominal plural, PLUR verbal pluractional, PROG progressive, PSN person name, REL relative, SCR subject cross reference, SG singular, TP topicaliser.

Ruben first provides a single sentence exemplifying the use of the ideophone *yààà*: “water goes *yààààà*”. Then he sketches a scene all too familiar in the tropical mountain village of Akpafu-Mempeasem: how when it rains, water gushes forth, splashing all over and flooding everything. In his explanation he provides us not only with an everyday context in which this ideophone is likely to be used, but also with a second ideophone *wààà*, closely related in meaning and form. Ruben’s explanation uses techniques that are common in the folk definitions by all speakers: he describes an everyday scene to which the ideophone can be applied, uses gestures to act out the meaning, and supplies ideophones that are similar in meaning as points of similarity and contrast.

In Extract (2), Foster explains the ideophone *petepete* in a succinct way, relying on gestures and antonyms as semantic anchoring points. Each of the four ideophone tokens in Foster’s definition is supported by a single time-aligned depictive gesture, showing the close relation between ideophones and gesture.

**Extract 2.** Folk definition of *petepete* ‘thin-fragile’ by Foster

1 F *ira né n-se petepete-petepete*  
 thing REL SCR-be IDPH.thin.fragile-EM  
 † G1 †

Something that is *petepete-petepete* [thin-fragile]

2 *ì-i-gbògbòrò*  
 it-NEG-IDPH.tough  
 † G2 †

It is not *gbògbòrò* [tough].

3 *ì-i-tòtòrò*  
 it-NEG-IDPH.thick  
 † G3 †

It is not *tòtòrò* [thick].

4 *ì-se ↑petepete-petepete↑*  
 it-BE IDPH.thin.fragile-EM  
 † G4 †

It is thin and fragile.

G1: both hands symmetric, gently pinching an imaginary thin object between thumb and forefinger

G2: both hands symmetric, clenching fists at chest-level and flexing arm muscles

G3: right hand index finger being pinched with thumb and forefinger of the left hand as if measuring thickness

G4: left hand palm up, right hand palm down, lightly tapping at the fingertips of the extended index fingers

“Something that’s *petepete-petepete* [thin-fragile]. It’s not *gbògbòrò* [tough]; it’s not *tòtòrò* [thick]; it is *↑petepete-petepete↑* [thin-fragile].”

The first gesture accompanying *petepete* depicts something very thin being measured between the fingertips; the gentle tapping of forefinger and thumb underlines the fragility evoked by the ideophone. The next ideophone, *gbògbòrò*, forcefully contrasts with this fragility by evoking an image of toughness and power: the arm muscles are flexed with clenched fists. Ideophone and gesture form a multi-modal unit embedded in a negative construction, so in effect the speaker is saying, “it is not like *this*”, where “*this*” is the image of strength and toughness evoked by ideophone plus gesture. The same holds for the next ideophone+gesture constellation in line 3. Here the measuring event of the first gesture is repeated, but this time with the thickness of one finger being pinched between forefinger and thumb; again a negative construction indicates “it is not thick like *this*”. The contrast is underlined by a final repetition of *petepete* with a slightly modified variant of the first gesture, this time lightly tapping at the fingertips of the extended forefingers. The cumulative effect of these ideophone-gesture composites is a maximum of explicitness with a minimum of words: *petepete* is not *gbògbòrò* [tough]; it’s not *totoro* [thick]; it is *petepete* [thin and fragile].

Gesture also plays an important role in the definition of *pəkəsəw* ‘quiet’ by Beatrice in Extract (3). Beatrice is assisted here by another speaker C (line 6).

**Extract 3.** Folk definition of *pəkəsəw* ‘quiet’ by Beatrice

- 1 B *pəkəsəw*:  
IDPH.quiet.EM  
*pəkəsəw*: [quiet]
- 2 (1.0)
- 3 *pəkəsəw*:  
IDPH.quiet.EM  
‡ G1 †  
*pəkəsəw*:
- 4 (1.0)
- 5 *ira né ma pəkəsəw*:  
I.thing REL DEP/have IDPH.quiet.EM  
‡ G2 †  
something that is *pəkəsəw*:
- 6 C *ì-na gidìgidì*  
it-lack IDPH.vigorous  
it’s not vigorous
- 7 B *ì-na gidì-*  
it-lack IDPH.vigorous  
‡ G3 †  
it’s not *gidì-*

8 *i- i-na* (0.9) *nda ni?*  
 it it-lack how FP.URG  
 † G4 †

it's- it's not... (0.9) how {do I put it}?

9 (1.0)

10 *↑kprakpra↑, i-na ↑kprakpra↑*  
 IDPH.energetic it-lack IDPH.energetic  
 † G5 † † G5 †

*↑kprakpra↑*, it lacks *↑kprakpra↑*

11 *i-ba pəkəsə:*  
 it-have IDPH.quiet.EM  
 † G6 †

It is *pəkəsə:* [quiet]

G1: cups both hands in resting position

G2: both hands flat, palm down, slowly moving downwards

G3: shrugs left shoulder

G4: clenched fists, arm movements suggesting running

G5: arm movements suggesting running

G6: both hands flat, palm down, moving outwards and downwards

“*pəkəsə:*. *pəkəsə:*. Something that is *pəkəsə:*. (C interjects: It doesn't have *gidigidi* [vigor].) It lacks *gidi-* It lacks ((acts out running movements)) – how do I put it? *↑Kprakpra↑*, it lacks *↑kprakpra↑* [energy].”

Beatrice starts out by repeating the word twice, and then puts it into a sentence (line 5), with hand movements suggesting a lack of energy and intensity. Her partner C suggests an antonym *gidigidi* ‘vigorous’, which she initially takes over but then abandons (line 6–7). She then constructs a composite utterance by combining a negative attributive construction (“it's not X”) with a gesture of high energy arm movements suggesting running (line 8). The sensory imagery is already there in the gesture, but the speech stays behind, as is clear from the exclamation *nda ni?* ‘how {do I put it}?’ Having finally retrieved the ideophone *kprakpra* ‘energetic’, she repeats this word together with the running movements, and brings the explanation full circle by contrasting all of this energetic, exuberant sensory imagery with a slowly pronounced *pəkəsə:*, the final vowel drawn out, accompanied by the same gesture as before: both hands flat, palm down, moving outwards and downwards.

Like Foster's explanation of *petepete*, Beatrice's explanation of *pəkəsə:* is rather light on verbal paraphrase but makes up for it with effective depiction in speech and gesture. The other speakers, independently, do much the same in their explanations of *pəkəsə:* (not shown here). Foster uses the exact same gesture as Beatrice (hands flat, palm down, slowly moving downward). Ruben acts out various activities (weeding, walking and eating) at a very slow pace, dramatically slowing down



his own pronunciation of the ideophone *pɔ.kɔ.sɔɔɔɔɔ* to show, rather than tell, the meaning. Ella repeats the ideophone, looks for a suitable image, and then gives the example of the slow movement of a snake.

Finally, consider a definition of *gbògbòrò* ‘tough, powerfully built’ by Ella (Extract (4)). Ella explains the ideophone by giving an example from real life: a boy that is said to be built like this. She then goes on to contrast this to another type of build: *werererere*, the thin and bony look of a very lean person, for instance his sister Atasi.<sup>2</sup> Like Foster in Extract (2) above, Ella uses a distinct gesture with the ideophone *gbògbòrò*, making clenched fists and flexing her arms’ muscles to depict toughness and power. To depict *werere* ‘gaunt’, she puts together her flat hands, leaving a very narrow space between them.

**Extract 4.** Folk definition of *gbògbòrò* ‘tough’ by Ella

- 1 E òbi mayè gbògbòrò-↑gbò↑ gbɔ!  
 child 3PL-give.birth IDPH.tough-EM1 way  
 † G1 †

The child they bore is *gbògbòrò*-↑*gbò*↑!

- 2 E! òbi gɔ ò-gbògbòrò kere!  
 INTJ child REL. 3SG-IDPH.tough just  
 † G1 †

Oh! That child is just *gbògbòrò*!

- 3 Ata ɔ-bùà ɔ-gbògbòrò kere  
 PSN 3SG-be.very 3SG-IDPH.tough just  
 † G1 †

Ata, he’s just extremely *gbògbòrò*.

- 4 Atasi ɔ, ò-se ↑werererererere↑  
 PSN 3SG.TP 3SG-be IDPH.gaunt.EM  
 † G2 †

Atasi on the other hand, she’s ↑*werererererere*↑ [skinny]!

- 5 Ata ɔ ne, ↑gbògbòrò↑!  
 PSN 3SG.TP TP, IDPH.tough  
 † G1 †

But Ata, he’s *gbògbòrò*.

G1: flexing of arms’ muscles with clenched fists

G2: palms of both hands put together to leave a very narrow space

“The child they bore is *gbògbòrò*-↑*gbò*↑ [powerfully built]! Oh! That child is just *gbògbòrò*. Ata, he’s just extremely *gbògbòrò*. Atasi on the other hand, she’s ↑*werererererere*↑ [skinny]! But Ata, he’s *gbògbòrò*.”

2. Here as elsewhere, names in data extracts have been anonymised.

#### 4. Three strategies used in folk definitions

Earlier work has focused on in the types of semantic relationships used in folk definitions: principles like *function*, *comparison*, *class inclusion*, *exemplification*, *circularity*, etc. (Casagrande & Hale 1967: 168). Casagrande and Hale's inventory of semantic relationships appears to be comprehensive, and many of the relationships they describe also make their appearance in the folk definitions in this chapter. This frees our hands to look at some less commonly discussed aspects of folk definitions, in particular three common explanatory strategies and their potential for language description and documentation.

When asked to explain a word or phrase, speakers describe everyday situations in which it would be used; they produce complex moves of speech together with illustrative gestures to clarify the meaning; and they make use of related and contrasting expressions as semantic anchoring points to delimit the meaning of the defined item. The following sections describe these three basic strategies in more detail.

##### 4.1 Everyday contexts of use

One of the most natural ways to explain a word is to describe the context in which it would be used. Take for instance Ruben's description of *yààà* 'water gushing' in Extract (3) above, which starts by giving an example sentence ('water goes *yààà*') and then works out a scenario in which the event depicted by the ideophone occurs: the heavy rains of the rainy season. Or Ella's explanation of *gbògbòrò* 'tough and powerful', where she uses the example of two kids, one of them powerfully built *gbògbòrò*, the other lean and skinny *wèrèrè*. This explanatory strategy provides us with real-life contexts of ideophone use.

Closely related to this is the practice of providing fixed expressions featuring the term to be explained. Some examples of such expressions from the folk definitions are given in (1). The ideophone *waī* 'bright' features in an exclamation commonly used when one suddenly understands a point – one sees the light *waī* 'brightly' (1a). For the ideophone *kananaa*, a common demand for silence in public gatherings is used as an example (1b). *Gbagbadzèè* 'wide mouth' is exemplified using the body-part term it co-occurs with, with the added warning that it is an insult (1c). Folk definitions thus bring to light idiomatic expressions and specialised uses of ideophones. Some specialised uses are due to the particular affordances of ideophones as vivid depictions of sensory imagery. For instance, ideophones depictive of aspects of the human body or of human behaviour are sometimes used in insults. In explicating *lekèrèè* 'somewhat plump', one speaker smirkingly cited the insult in (2).

- (1) a. *i-kpa waī* {it-be.clear IDPH.bright} ‘I see!’ (lit. it’s clear *waī*!)  
 b. *mì-lo kananaa*: {2PL-be.silent IDPH.silent} ‘be still!’  
 c. *kànya gbagbadzεε – sitia side ló!* {mouth IDPH.wide insult it.is FP}  
 ‘wide mouth – an insult, mind you!’
- (2) *rùì mmɔ iyiri lεkεε-a!*  
 get.away there belly IDPH.plump-ADJ  
 ‘Move away from there, fatty!’ [lit. plump belly]

Insults and ideophones go well together because one of the basic techniques of insults is to speak ill of a person’s physical characteristics, and ideophones provide just the sort of specific imagery that is needed to do so effectively (Samarin 1969; Blench 2010). However, few ideophones in Siwu are inherently abusive. In most cases, their abusive connotations are entirely due to their creative application to bodily characteristics. The use of ideophones in verbal abuse can therefore be compared to the device of simile, whereby innocent words are turned into imaginative insults. Indeed sometimes both are combined, as in *itì lèkèsèè ale itoreta* ‘your head is *lèkèsèè* [huge] like an anvil’.<sup>3</sup>

A related use of ideophones that surfaces in the folk definition is an evaluative frame, in which ideophones are used to highlight deviations from communal norms or averages, often related to body posture or manners of movement (a practice described for the neighbouring Anlo Ewe people in Geurts 2002: 75–84). This can be seen in ideophones like *gbadara-gbadara* ‘walking like a drunk’ and *kpɛgɛɛ* ‘proud upright body posture’, both of which have strong evaluative connotations. But even ideophones with fairly neutral meanings can be used in this way. An example from the folk definitions is the following excerpt from Ella’s explanation of *kpoo* ‘still’ (Extract (5)).

Extract 5. Folk definition of *kpoo* ‘still’ by Ella (excerpt)

- 1 E °↑*kpoooooo*↑°  
 IDPH.still.EM  
 °↑*kpoooooo*↑° ((standing upright, arms folded, head bowed))
- 2 *Oh! Be dɔ-ɔ à-yε kpoo gbɔ?*  
 INTJ what hurt-2SG.O 2SG-stand IDPH.still manner  
 Oh! What hurt you that you stand *kpoo* like that?

3. Large round stone anvils are a common sight in the town of Akpafu-Todzi. They are among the most enduring relics of the iron industry that made Akpafu famous (Rattray 1916; Pole 1982).

- 3    °À-γε        ↑kpoooo↑°  
      2SG-stand IDPH.still.EM  
      °You stand ↑kpoooo↑°
- 4    ðnye        a-to-o?  
      sickness 2SG-hold-Q  
      Are you sick?
- 5    fiε        a-γε        kpoo        gbɔ?  
      before 2SG-stand IDPH.still manner  
      that you're standing kpoo like that?
- 6    Iti    te        idodo        mè        ðso        Lò-γε        ↑kpooo↑  
      head PROG it-PLUR.hurt 1SG.O reason 1SG-stand IDPH.still.EM  
      I'm having a headache so I'm standing ↑kpooo↑
- 7    ðyu    to        mè,        ðso        Lò-γε        ↑kpooo↑  
      cold hold 1SG.O, reason 1SG-stand IDPH.still.EM  
      I'm feeling cold, so I'm standing ↑kpooo↑  
      “°↑Kpoooo↑°. Oh! What's the matter with you that you're standing kpoo like  
      that? °You stand ↑kpoooo↑° Are you sick? That you're standing kpoo like  
      that? 'I'm having a headache, that's why I'm standing ↑kpooo↑.' 'I'm feeling  
      cold, that's why I'm standing ↑kpooo↑.'”

Ella here exemplifies a use of *kpoo* ‘still, silent’ that goes with the passive body posture of someone silently suffering. She asks the kind of questions that someone behaving like that gets asked by family members: “What’s the matter with you? Are you sick?” Then she changes perspective to respond to these questions, providing the typical reasons (a headache, feeling cold) that may lead one to behave so passively and silently. Her explanation exemplifies the use of ideophones for diagnostics and evaluation.

The common strategy of explaining words by framing situations and citing expressions from everyday life allows us to tap into the background knowledge against which they are understood and provides us with a window into their real-life use. Fixed expressions and special usage contexts like insults and evaluatives point to ethnographic rich points (Agar 2009) and possible loci of cultural variation. In everyday interaction, people use ideophones to render fine details in stories, joke with each other, and negotiate issues of experiential access and epistemic independence (Dingemanse 2011: 251–300). The fact that these contexts of usage also make their appearance in folk definitions of ideophones shows that the procedure succeeds in eliciting knowledge of everyday language use.

## 4.2 Depictive gestures

In a study exploring methods for determining the meanings of ideophones, William Samarin noted: “It turned out that some of the meanings I isolated were based almost exclusively on gestures. On the assumption that informants were leaning too heavily on their gestures to convey the meanings, I have tried, unsuccessfully, to get them to verbalise without gestures” (1971: 153). These observations are revealing for two reasons. First, because they show just how tight the relationship between speech and gesture can be, especially in the case of ideophones (see Dingemanse 2013 for a review). Second, because they remind us how natural it is for speakers to construct folk definitions as multi-modal units. When asked to explain a word, speakers will tend to construct their explanation as a series of composite utterances integrating speech and gesture (Engle 1998; Enfield 2009). As shown below, we can learn a lot from both the verbal and non-verbal aspects of such explanations.

In folk definitions of Siwu ideophones, speech and gesture are tightly coupled. Depictive gestures are particularly common, and frequently occur synchronised with the ideophones, as we saw in some of the examples above. Depictive gestures are non-conventionalised bodily movements that depict aspects of the accompanying speech (McNeill 1992 calls them “representational gestures”). They are a useful complement to verbal explication because they are good for visualizing aspects of the sensory imagery that ideophones depict. They may be even better for this purpose than ordinary words. As Diffloth noted in a classic study of ideophones in Asian languages, “many speakers cannot find exact paraphrases and prefer to repeat the ideophone with a more distinct elocution, accompanied by facial expressions and body gestures if appropriate” (1972: 441).

What can such gestures tell us about the meanings of ideophones? Already we have seen several instances of the use of gesture to arrive at very concise definitions: in the explanations of *petepete* ‘thin+fragile’ and *pəkəsə* ‘quiet’ by Foster and Beatrice, respectively. These cases demonstrate a method that we may call contrastive definition. Foster (in Extract (2)) defines *petepete* by introducing it with a gentle pinching gesture and then contrasting it to two other ideophone+gesture constellations: *gbògbòrò* ‘tough’, presented with a gesture of toughness and power, and *totoro* ‘thick’, presented with a gesture depicting thickness. Beatrice depicts *pəkəsə* ‘quiet’ with a gesture of two flat hands, palm down, moving downwards, and contrasts it with the high energy running movements that come with the ideophone *kprakpra* ‘energetic’. In these cases, the gestures and ideophones together set up contrasts in meaning and thereby illuminate the semantics of the term to be defined.

Depictive gestures are especially useful to represent meanings that may be hard to articulate in ordinary words. Take the case of *giligili* versus *minimini*, two

Siwu ideophones that have to do something with ‘roundness’. Foster offers folk definitions that, if we were to consider them as text, say next to nothing: “it’s *giligili*” (Extract (6)) and “it’s *minimini*” (Extract (7)).

**Extract 6.** Folk definition of *giligili* by Foster

- 1     *giligili*  
       IDPH.circular  
       *Giligili*
- 2     *i-se giligili-giligiligi*  
       it-be IDPH.circular-EM  
       *It’s giligili-giligiligi*  
       † G1: circle drawn with right index finger  
       “*Giligili. It’s giligili-giligiligi.*”

**Extract 7.** Folk definition of *minimini* by Foster

- 1     *minimini*  
       IDPH.spherical  
       *minimini*
- 3     *i-se minimini-minimini*  
       it-be IDPH.circular-EM  
       *It’s miniminiminimini.*  
       † G1: two-handed gesture depicting a sphere.  
       “*Minimini. It’s minimini-minimini.*”

It is only when we take Foster’s definitions for what they are – composite utterances – that a meaningful distinction emerges. For *giligili*, he traces a circular outline in the air with his index finger. For *minimini*, he molds a sphere with both hands. Is this just an idiosyncrasy, or do other speakers do the same? Beatrice explains *giligili* by drawing a circle in a horizontal plane together with a description of a hole dug in the ground. For *minimini*, she enumerates four types of fruit, accompanying every single one with a depictive gesture of a hand-sized sphere. Ruben draws a circle on the sandy ground to exemplify *giligili* ‘circular’, and models a large sphere in front of his body as an example of *minimini* ‘spherical’. Ella traces the circular outline of the rim of the mortar to exemplify *giligili* and molds a sphere in space for *minimini*. So to explain *giligili*, all four speakers draw a circle with their index finger (Figure 1). In contrast, to explain *minimini*, all four speakers produce a two-handed gesture depicting a sphere (Figure 2). We see thus that the gesture reliably changes with the word form, and that the key difference between these two ideophones is one of dimensionality: *giligili* can be glossed as ‘circular (round 2D)’ and *minimini* as ‘spherical (round 3D)’.



Figure 1. Four folk definitions of *giligili* 'circular' (round-2D)



Figure 2. Four folk definitions of *minimini* 'spherical' (round-3D)

The *giligili/minimini* clips show striking convergences in the co-speech gestures used by four different speakers. Such cases raise the question if these gestures should not be thought of as at least partly conventionalised. Following Dingemans (2013), we can distinguish two possible reasons why gestures may look similar across speakers. One is *conceptual commonality*: gestures may come to look the same because they are attempts to depict the same kind of sensory imagery. The other is *communicative convention*: the gestures may look the same because they are subject to some kind of social convention. Over time, known processes of conventionalisation may lead from one to the other: gestures that are similar due to conceptual commonality may come to be regimented by communicative conventions.

Some ideophone-gestures seem to be quite conventionalised, for instance the combination of *gbògbòrò* 'tough' with a gesture of flexing the arm muscles, fists

clenched. We saw this gesture in Extract (2) (by Foster) and Extract (4) (by Ella), and it is commonly seen in everyday conversation in Siwu. Whereas there are several possible ways to depict toughness in gesture, the co-speech gesture coming with *gbògbòrò* ‘tough’ is always the same, and it is likely that this gesture over time has attained a degree of conventionalisation.

For the gestures accompanying *giligili* ‘circular’ and *minimini* ‘spherical’ the case is more equivocal. Despite important similarities, there is also a great deal of variation: the gestures differ in terms of size, orientation (in a horizontal or vertical plane), position of the hands (on the ground or in the space before the body), and method of representation (tracing an outline, modelling a shape, or handling an object). The amount of variety across these different parameters suggests that the convergence in certain aspects (e.g. depicting a circle versus a sphere) is due to the underlying commonality in the sensory imagery being depicted.

In conclusion, then, gestures are an integral part of folk definitions. Although all types of gestures occur (beats, emblems, pointing gestures, depictive gestures), here I have focused on the use of depictive gestures in folk definitions of ideophones. From tender pinching movements to muscular shows of toughness and from contrasts in energy to depictions of dimensionality, the depictive gestures that come with ideophones give us access to meaning in unprecedented ways. The sensory meanings of ideophones may be hard to capture in ordinary words, but depictive gestures help to give expression to the imagery they evoke.

### 4.3 Sense relations

A commonly noted feature of folk definitions is the use of synonyms (near semantic neighbours), antonyms (words with opposing meanings) and other semantic anchoring points (Casagrande & Hale 1967). Such sense relations can tell us more about the conceptual structuring of the domain under investigation, in this case ideophones.

In the folk definitions, ideophones often occur in more or less regular collocations with certain verbs. For instance, the ideophones *yààà* ‘gushing’ and *wààà* ‘splashing’ in Extract (1) both modify the verb *sɛ* ‘go’; ideophones for silence like *kpoo* and *kananaa* often co-occur with the verb *lo* ‘be silent’; and ideophones for visual phenomena often occur as modifiers of the verb *fiɛ* ‘shine’. Verb-ideophone collocations such as these are one reason for early characterisations of ideophones as “intensifiers” (e.g. Vidal 1852; Schlegel 1857; Prietze 1908), because English translation equivalents of such phrases often involve intensifying adverbs (‘very silent’, ‘very shiny’). This is a good example of the kind of translation problem we started out with: a claim about the linguistic status of ideophones more in the metalanguage than in data from the language under investigation. It provides



a rather impoverished conception of what ideophones do in such collocations. They do not just intensify, they also add their own imagistic meanings. The relationship may be better characterised as a figure/ground association, where the general meaning of the verb provides the ground and the ideophone is the figure, depicting the scene in vivid sensory detail, with the natural consequence that the depiction is in focus and may be experienced more intensely.

Ideophones are also contrasted with other ideophones in the folk definitions. Take, again, Foster's explanation of *petepete* 'thin + fragile' (Extract (2)). He delimits the meaning of *petepete* by mentioning two lexical opposites, both ideophones: *gbògbòrò* 'sturdy' and *tòtòrò* 'thick'. After that, the original ideophone is simply restated as if to say that this definition must be sufficient. Such ideophone-ideophone relations are always horizontal, that is, there is no general ideophone for 'being fat' of which ideophones like *lekereε* 'plump', *lukuruu* 'fat' and *pimbilii/pumbuluu/pɔmbɔɔ* 'fat+rounded' would be hyponyms. In fact there is no evidence for hierarchical relations like hyperonymy or hyponymy within the Siwu ideophone inventory, in line with a similar observation on South-East Asian ideophones by Watson (2001). Ideophones appear to operate all on the same level of specificity and can only be related to each other in non-hierarchical ways, i.e. in terms of greater or lesser similarity or compatibility in meaning.

Related to this is the observation that there appear to be many incompatible items, but very few, if any, binary antonyms or true lexical opposites in the ideophone inventory. Typical examples of binary antonyms in English are *long* : *short*, *hot* : *cold* (Lyons 1977:9; Cruse 1986:12). Although there are ideophones which can be given antonymic English glosses, the relations between them are rarely simply binary. For instance, *yululu* is not simply 'cold', it is a specific sensation of object temperature that can be contrasted with *nyènènè* 'cold (body temperature)' – so one can swim in water that is *yululu* and come to feel *nyènènè* as a result. On the 'hot' end of the spectrum, we have ideophones like *yuayua* 'punctuated burning sensation', *kpiekpie* 'lukewarm [of liquids]' and *sùùù* 'burning sensation on the skin', the latter of which, incidentally, has a counterpart *saaa* 'cool sensation on the skin'. The same thing holds for 'long' versus 'short'. There are ideophones like *krukutuu* 'short and crooked', *teberεε* 'short [of time]', *tuguluu* 'short and fat'; and ideophones like *tagbaraa* 'long [of elongated objects]', *sīī* 'long [implying fictive motion]' *belele* 'extended', *sadzala* 'oblong and lumpy'. If these do not look like simple binary antonyms, it is because they are not. From the point of view of the Siwu lexicon, binary antonymy is overrated. There are often verbs or collocations that express one scale and these are negated if need be. Thus the verb *kārā* 'be tall' defines a scale of tallness, but there is no antonym 'be short' (*û-i-kārā* {3SG/NEG-NEG-be.tall} 'he is not long'); and the noun *ɔ̀tɔ̀* 'fire' is used in expressions like *iba ɔ̀tɔ̀* 'it's hot' or *ina ɔ̀tɔ̀* 'it is not hot' (it has fire/lacks fire, respectively).

There is a larger point here on semantic structure. Although textbook sense relations like antonymy and synonymy are often given a lot of attention, in actual fact they appear to be rare, and the neat semantic arguments made about them may well turn out to presuppose idealised semantic relationships that seldom if ever obtain in natural language. Consider the fact that speakers often pick not one, but multiple semantic anchoring points to explicate the meanings of ideophones – e.g. Foster contrasting *petepete* ‘thin-fragile’ with *gbògbòrò* ‘tough’ and *tòtòrò* ‘thick’, and Beatrice contrasting *pàkàsà* ‘quiet’ with *gìdìgìdì* ‘vigourous’ and *kprakpra* ‘energetic’. Psychologically realistic models of the lexicon place words in dense webs of semantic and phonological relationships, informed more by stochastic distributional and combinatorial information than by abstract formal relations (Levelt, Roelofs & Meyer 1999), and the folk definitions appear to support this kind of picture. Cataloguing sense relations from folk definitions can help the linguist to better understand the meanings of words, and the lexicographer to better describe them.

## 5. Discussion

I have argued that folk definitions are experience-near to consultants since clarifications and explanations occur commonly in everyday language use. This raises the question of how consultants themselves construe the task of providing folk definitions. What is the folk definition of “folk definition”? At the close of several afternoons of recording sessions during which we recorded folk definitions for over 200 ideophones, I asked Ruben Owiafe, my senior teacher, to reflect on the work we had been doing together. His explanation follows in Extract (8) below.

**Extract 8.** “Words that illuminate matters” [Ruben Owiafe]

- 1 R *Àtǎme wa bó-bra ñgbe pelepelee ne.*  
message/word REL 1PL:PST-do here ADV.completely TP  
All the words we did here.
- 2 *Wā ne ... ñgò à-kparara ìra.*  
REL.TP TP ... how SCR-illuminate thing  
Those words ... they illuminate matters.
- 3 *À-kparara ne, sò ma-a-nyà mà*  
SCR-illuminate TP, QT 3PL-FUT-see 3PL  
They illuminate things so that people will see them.
- 4 K *Ma-a-nyà ne màdì ìte.*  
3PL-FUT-see TP 3PL-extract NOM-teach  
They will see and learn. (lit. ‘extract lessons’)

5 R *Si a-nyà ñgbe ne, nyà ne ìde ñgbe*  
 if 2SG-see here TP, see REL it-be here  
 If you see this here ((points to his right)), you see how it is here ((points to his left)).

For Ruben, the core of what we had been doing centered around “illuminating things so that people will see.” His neighbour Kofi, who had been an onlooker during some of the sessions, added: “so that people see and learn from it.” This process of seeing and learning is further explained by Ruben: “if you see this here,” (points to his right), “you see how it is here” (points to his left) (see Figure 3). Folk definitions thus make us see things in terms of other things.<sup>4</sup>



Figure 3. Ruben Owiafe’s explanation: “seeing as” as a key feature of folk definitions

In this chapter I investigated three ways in which we can learn from folk definitions: the framing of everyday situations, the use of depictive gestures, and the use of sense relations as semantic anchoring points. One important lesson we can draw from this exercise is that ideophones are not the elusive and erratic words that they have often been taken to be. Siwu speakers providing folk definitions find it no more difficult to explain ideophones than other words like nouns or verbs, and as we have seen, different speakers converge on similar ways of explaining the same ideophones.

Folk definitions show that ideophones are robustly conventionalised words with stable meanings, and not, as some authors have maintained, “simply sounds used in conveying a vivid impression” (Okpewho 1992: 93) or words that are “semantically empty” (Moshi 1993: 190). Perhaps some ideophone systems are

4. There is a subtle ambiguity in Ruben’s explanation. The word *it̩mɛ* (pl. *at̩mɛ*) in line 1 can be used to refer to single linguistic units (‘words’) or to larger discourse structures (‘messages’). When Ruben says, “the *at̩mɛ* that we did here... they illuminate matters”, this can be interpreted as referring to the ideophones he defined, or to the folk definitions themselves.

less stable and conventionalised than others. This is an empirical issue that should not be prejudged. But even if we allow for some cross-linguistic variation on this point,<sup>5</sup> it would be thoroughly implausible for any language to feature a large class of words that are, in Moshi's words, "semantically empty but context dependent" (Moshi 1993: 190). After all, if no meaning is encoded and interpretation is fully determined by context, maintaining an inventory of hundreds of ideophones would be like having hundreds of different versions of *what-d'you-call-it*, rather defeating the point of such a phrase (Enfield 2003). Context always contributes to meaning-making, but the evidence suggests that ideophones do have semantic content, and that important aspects of this content can be captured in multimodal folk definitions. To get a better view of the semantics of ideophones, then, we need to go beyond traditional elicitation methods, which have never worked all that great for ideophones (Childs 1993; Noss 1999; Lydall 2000; de Schryver 2009; Blench 2010). Folk definitions are of course only one of several possible methods for studying the meaning and use of ideophones, reviewed elsewhere (Dingemans 2012).

As often, challenge equals opportunity: if ideophones force us to enrich our methods, we may well find that these enriched methods also help bring other aspects of language into sharper relief. Let me briefly review the broader relevance of the three strategies discussed. First, the everyday situations that are often used to explain ideophones express important aspects of the background knowledge against which ideophones are understood, and they provide a window into the real-life use of ideophones. They show that folk definitions offer a systematic way to document the rich cultural background knowledge that can be hard to access otherwise. This makes them a useful tool for linguistic analysis as well as an important data type for language documentation. Second, depictive co-speech gestures, common in the folk definitions, underline the depictive nature of ideophones and provide insight into aspects of meaning that are otherwise hard to get at. Again this does not just hold for ideophones. Language in its most natural form is multimodal: it combines speech and visible behaviour into composite utterances. The gestures that people produce are not incidental, but form an integral part of their communicative behaviour. Third, the use of other words as semantic anchoring points gives us insight into the sense relations between words in a language. We have seen that ideophones bear a figure/ground relationship to the general verbs they modify, and enter into horizontal relations of similarity and contrast with each other. The

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5. For instance, there may be sociolinguistic factors affecting the use and recall of ideophones, as in the urban setting described by Childs (1994b: 272). Also, Roger Blench (p.c.; and see Blench 2010), who has done extensive fieldwork on ideophones in various Nigerian languages, reports that eliciting ideophones may be relatively easy in one community but hard in the next.

broader lesson is that folk definitions provide a window onto the dense networks of form, and meaning that together make up linguistic systems.

Folk definitions illuminate matters in more ways than one. They are a rich source of data on language, culture and mind, and they make visible a crucial intermediate step that too often remains hidden in linguistic field research: the process of interpretation and clarification by native speaker consultants. In an age of massive language loss, preserving rich records of native speaker knowledge is more important than ever. These native explanations in themselves are important records in the documentation of the language under study. Describing and documenting languages is no less daunting a task for field linguists today than it was for Malinowski and other fieldworkers a century ago. With the help of folk definitions we can not only improve our analytical grasp of the languages we study, but also preserve the voices and visions of their speakers.

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