Ezra Pound among the Mawu

Ideophones and iconicity in Siwu

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The Mawu people of eastern Ghana make common use of ideophones: marked words that depict sensory imagery. Ideophones have been described as "poetry in ordinary language," yet the shadow of Lévy-Bruhl, who assigned such words to the realm of primitivity, has loomed large over linguistics and literary theory alike. The poet Ezra Pound is a case in point: while his fascination with Chinese characters spawned the ideogrammic method, the mimicry and gestures of the "primitive languages in Africa" were never more than a mere curiosity to him. This paper imagines Pound transposed into the linguaculture of the Mawu. What would have struck him about their ways of 'charging language' with imagery? I juxtapose Pound's views of the poetic image with an analysis of how different layers of iconicity in ideophones combine to depict sensory imagery. This exercise illuminates aspects of what one might call 'the ideophonic method'.

1. Introduction[1]

In the early essay *Vorticism* (1914), the poet Ezra Pound, one of the central figures of the Modernist movement, writes about his attempts to verbalize an experience he had in a station of the metro:

> Three years ago in Paris I got out of a 'metro' train at La Concorde, and saw suddenly a beautiful face, and then another and another, and then a beautiful child's face, and then another beautiful woman, and I tried all that day to find words for what this had meant to me, and I could not find any words that seemed to me worthy, or as lovely as that sudden emotion.   (Pound 1914: 465)

This search for words is typical of Pound; in fact, the unrelenting quest for words, for ways to "present […] an intellectual and emotional complex in an instance of time" (1914: 464), is a leading thread through all of his work from early Imagism to the latest *Cantos*, and can be seen as the catalyst for his innovative views on poetry and poetry writing. A useful summary of his thoughts about this process of image-making is provided in the *ABC of Reading*. There, he describes three main methods of "charging language": melopoeia: "inducing emotional correlations by the sound and rhythm of speech"; phanopoeia: "throwing the object onto the visual imagination"; and logopoeia: "using the intellectual and emotional associations of words and word groups" (Pound 1934: 36–7). The first two of these Pound sees as primary, but he emphasizes their constant interplay in poetry and devotes a good deal of the *ABC of Reading* to anthologizing work from a range of different traditions in which these techniques can be seen to be at play.

Let us return to *Vorticism*. In that essay, Pound describes how he first composed a thirty-line poem about the metro experience but destroyed it because it was "of second intensity" (1914: 467). He wrote a poem half that length six months later; and finally he formed the following *haiku*-like poem:

> The apparition of these faces in the crowd:
> Petals, on a wet, black bough.   (1914: 467)

Of all his attempts, he explains, the final version is closest to the ideal of achieving the "most intense" form of expression. This process of successive condensation is succinctly expressed in Pound's dictum "Dichten = condensare" (1934: 36), and this is where ideophones come in, as words that, precisely, condense a rich experience into one word. Consider the following ideophone poem in Gbaya, composed by the Cameroonian artist Dogobadomo:

(1)   *Ŋgalaŋ*
       Pindoŋ
       Séléle
       Dawa iŋa só te.
       A leap
       Whoosh
       Silence
       How the monkey knows trees.   (from Noss 1989: 33)

The first three lines of this poem are simply three ideophones. It launches into action with *ŋgalan*, "the image of an animal's agile leap from the ground to the trunk of a tree", then shifts viewpoint with *pindoŋ*, "the image of the swaying whoosh of a leafy branch that dips suddenly as the weight of a fairly large creature pushes it downward" (*ibid.*: 34). After these successive action shots, a sudden silence descends, evoked by the ideophone *sélélé*. Finally we zoom out to the full scene with the exclamation "How

the monkey knows trees!", which, Noss tells us, can be seen as an allusion to the Gbaya proverb "One doesn't teach the monkey how to climb trees" (*ibid.*: 34).[2]

The way in which ideophones provide this poem with cinematic qualities resonates with Pound's notion of 'luminous detail'. "The artist," he writes, "seeks out the luminous detail and presents it. He does not comment." (Pound 1973 [1912]: 22; see also Basbøll 2008). The focus is on presentation rather than commentary, on depiction rather than description. Indeed, for Dogobadomo, creator of the above poem and native speaker of Gbaya, ideophones are "shortcuts", "words that tell lots of things" (Noss 1989: 34). Siwu speakers offer similar metalinguistic reflections. For instance, Ruben Owiafe, my senior consultant, explains that they "illuminate things" and "make people see how things are". They are, in Poundian terms, charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree.

2.   Ideophones

Ideophones are marked words that depict sensory imagery. They are found abundantly in African, Asian, and Amerindian languages; as a distinct class of words they are rare in Indo-European languages (Voeltz & Kilian-Hatz 2001). Their use has been summarized eloquently by Fortune:

> With them one is in a special realm of spoken art. There is a roundness, a complete shape, not so vividly conveyed by more complex constructions, more formal expressions. They attempt to be a vivid re-presentation or re-creation of an event in sound […]. Always they try to capture the freshness of an event and to express it of themselves with nothing to dull or cloud the evocation.   (Fortune 1962: 6)

The similarity between ideophonic and poetic language is easy to see. Yet the shadow of Lévy-Bruhl (1910), who assigned mimesis in language to the realm of primitivity, has loomed large over linguistics and literary theory alike. Ezra Pound is a case in point: while his fascination with Chinese writing spawned the ideogrammic method, the mimicry and gestures of the 'primitive languages in Africa' would never be more than a mere curiosity to him.

This paper imagines Pound transposed into the culture of the Mawu people of eastern Ghana. What would have struck him about their ways of charging language with imagery? I juxtapose Pound's perpetual interest in the exact qualities of perceptions with

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2.   A fuller analysis of this poem (and several others) can be found in Noss' (1989) article. If there is anything that corresponds to Karl Bühler's (1934: 201) tentative notion of a *Tonfilm*, this is it.

the ways in which ideophones suggest perceptual meanings. The goal of this analysis is to sharpen our views of iconicity in ideophones and thereby to shed light on an important everyday poetic device in the world's languages, one that we might call (by analogy to Pound's ideogrammic method), 'the ideophonic method'.

2.1   The Mawu people and their language

The Mawu people of eastern Ghana live in a total of eight villages scattered about in the mountains north of Hohoe. They number about 12,000, although there is also a sizable diaspora in Ghana's major cities and abroad. Their land (*Kawu* in Siwu) is divided into Akpafu (north-west) and Lolobi (north-east), corresponding to a dialectal division. Most Mawu are peasant farmers growing upland rice, cocoa, corn, cassava, yam, plantain, and other crops on small plots of land. The men sometimes have day jobs in neighbouring towns, while the women sell in the markets what remains from the produce after their family has been fed.

Siwu, the language spoken by the Mawu people, is a Kwa (Niger-Congo) language of the Ghana-Togo Mountain group. Siwu has twenty consonants and seven oral vowels with five nasalized counterparts. The language is tonal, with tone performing both lexical and grammatical functions. Siwu has an active noun class system with singular and plural classes expressed by prefixes and agreement marked on the verb. Serial verb constructions are common. Verb paradigms express mainly aspect features; tense is less important. The examples in this paper are drawn from an extensive corpus of data representing the Akpafu dialect of Siwu as spoken in Mempeasem.

2.2   Ideophones in Siwu

To get a feel for the kind of words we are talking about, consider the examples in (2) below. The clunky English glosses are provided out of necessity, but one should really pronounce the words to appreciate the rich bouquet of meanings they embody in their singular form.[3]

(2)   *kpebebee*   the rigid posture of a muscular person
      kpɔtɔrɔ-kpɔtɔrɔ   the jerky walk of a turtle
      tsarara   the fluidity of a liquid substance (e.g. palm oil)
      ɣiii   the roaring feeling of vertigo

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3.   I use a slightly extended version of the Siwu orthography. Most characters represent their IPA equivalents; /ts/ and /dz/ are palatal affricates, /kp/ and /gb/ are digraphs for the doubly articulated labiovelar consonants [k͡p] and [g͡b] and /ɣ/ is a pharyngeal approximant (Ford & Iddah 1973: §0.1.3).

These are words that belong to the large class of ideophones in Siwu. Ideophones, in Siwu as well as in other languages, set themselves apart from ordinary words in several ways: they are longer on average than nouns and verbs;[4] they have deviant word structures (featuring for example long vowels as in *saaa* 'cool sensation' and *wùrùfùù* 'fluffy texture', and bisyllabic and trisyllabic reduplicated roots as in *tsɔ̀kwɛ-tsɔ̀kwɛ* 'sawing movement' and *nyɛmɛrɛ-nyɛmɛrɛ* 'slithering movement'); they are often only loosely integrated in the sentence, if at all; and finally, in actual use, they are more often than not emphasized, and they easily undergo expressive word formation processes like lengthening and reduplication (for example, *saa* may be greatly lengthened and *tsɔ̀kwɛ-tsɔ̀kwɛ* may be indefinitely repeated). The effect of this is that ideophones are quite unlike ordinary words, which do their work without attracting much attention themselves; instead, ideophones stand out as speech heard in a special way. Their material properties (articulatory gestures, sound) are foregrounded, opening up the way for iconic mappings between sound and sense.

Ideophones make minute distinctions between different kinds of sensory experiences. Consider the following four Siwu ideophones having to do with silence:

(3)   *kananana*   quietness, lacking noise or sound
       nɔmɛ, ɔmãgẽ lo kanana 'the town is quiet today'

       kpoo   stillness, nocturnal silence
       a rɛ kpoo? 'did you have a sound sleep?'

       gbigbinigbi   speechless, having no retort
       ǹdo lòkarɛ ɔ itɔ̄me ayɛ àta ànyɔ mɛ gbigbinigbi 'I'm asking you a question and now you're standing looking at me dumbfounded!'

       mùnùmùnù   inability to speak for physical or emotional reasons
       ɔ̀si mùnùmùnù 'he just sits dumb'

The meanings of these four ideophones are quite different. *Kanana* is perhaps the most general, often heard in requests for silence or to refer to the silence of the town when everyone is on the farm. *Kpoo* is also quite common, being part of the morning greeting formula *a rɛ kpoo?* 'did you have a sound sleep?' (Dingemanse 2009). It has a positive connotation of noctural silence and sound sleep, and like *kanana* it can be used in requests for silence. The other two ideophones carry negative valence; *gbigbinigbi* evokes being at a loss for words, while *mùnùmùnù* evokes a physical or emotional inability to speak. To borrow a phrasing of Pound's, translating these four

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4.   A variance analysis of the word length (counted in phonemes) of 305 verbs, 799 nouns, and 290 ideophones shows that the differences between these three groups are statistically significant: $F(2, 1390) = 270.56$, $p < .0001$.

ideophones simply by 'silence' would be "on a par with translating rhinoceros, fox and giraffe indifferently by 'quadruped' or 'animal'" (1969: 21). The point being that ideophones fulfil much the same role as the images in Pound's work, namely to evoke different species of experiences.

3.   Iconicity: Relations between form and meaning in ideophones

One of the recurring points of agreement in the literature on ideophones is that they are pervasively iconic, or sound-symbolic, phonosemantic, mimetic. All of these roughly interchangeable terms have the same basic import, namely that ideophones are not just arbitrary linguistic signs but that there is some perceived resemblance between their form and meaning.

Iconicity in language relies on the natural fact that linguistic signs are not passive labels paired with abstract meanings, but that their 'sensory properties' afford certain possibilities for suggesting meaning (Bühler 1934: 195–216; Marks 1978; Jakobson and Waugh 1979; Tsur 1992). How does one go about depicting sensory events in words? The question can be reframed as follows: what are the properties of words and of perceived events such that there can be iconic mappings between the two? There are several. First of all, since speech is sound, it can be used to mime non-speech sounds. But speech is a lot more than the auditory signal: since it is bodies that do the talking, there is also a rich internal structure in the form of articulatory gestures, and this internal structure can be harnessed to depict certain aspects of perceived events. More generally, since speech is itself a kind of sensory experience, it shares with other sensory experiences the basic *suprasensory* attributes (Marks 1978: 51) of duration, intensity, and quality, and this affords us with several possibilities as we will see below.

In the discussion that follows I build on the Peircean sense of iconicity, defined as a perceived resemblance between form and meaning. There has been much discussion of iconicity at the level of grammar in recent years (Jakobson 1965; Haiman 1980; Newmeyer 1992; Haspelmath 2008, among others), but I restrict myself to iconicity at the lexical level and specifically in ideophones. First, however, a few caveats that I will explain by means of a further analogy with Pound's work.

3.1   A cautionary tale

Over the years, Pound developed a fascination with the poetic affordances of logographic writing systems, especially Chinese. This fascination originated with his discovery of a theory of the Chinese character by Ernest Fenollosa (1936), who argued that Chinese writing reflects etymology ('true sense') in a way that phonetic writing does not. In Pound's idealist view of etymology (Li 1986), this rendered the Chinese character vastly superior to Western phonetic script in terms of picture-making. Soon

enough however, scholarly studies of logographic writing systems showed that Chinese characters are semantic-phonetic compounds rather than transparent pictures, and Pound's idyllic conception of Chinese characters as evocative ideograms was severely and justly criticized (Kennedy 1958; cf. also DeFrancis 1984).

Now, ideophones are often too readily characterized as imitative words in a way that is quite reminiscent of Pound's overeager iconization of Chinese writing. In reality, the picture is much more complex. First of all because ideophones are never exclusively iconic (Nuckolls 1992). Like all linguistic signs, they mix Peircean modes of signification (for example, they are symbolic in that they are subject to conventionalization so that their interpretation is partly socially mediated; and they are indexical to the extent that they 'point to' perceptions, inviting the listener to see for themselves). Secondly, because there are several types of iconicity at play in ideophones, and simple imitation is but one of them (and a minor one at that). Thirdly, because not all ideophones are transparently iconic. This last point, which is sometimes too easily glossed over by those who investigate sound-symbolism in ideophones, bears underscoring.

Not all ideophones show transparent form-meaning mappings, for there are limits to the iconic representational powers of speech. That speech can mimic non-linguistic sound is trivial, and that it can depict aspectual structure is also widely attested (see Sections 3.2 and 3.3.1 respectively), but beyond that we quickly run out of possibilities. Thus, while the aspectual structure of a sawing movement can be depicted by reduplication, it is less clear how one would go about depicting a colour in speech. And yet we do find ideophones for colours – not just in Siwu, but in many ideophonic languages. In fact, cross-linguistically, the meanings of ideophones frequently extend over all sensory modalities and also include inner feelings and sensations, thus encompassing many percepts that seem difficult or impossible to map iconically in speech (take for instance Siwu *kpɔkɔtɔɔ* 'nervous feeling' or *ɣɛkpɛtɛɛ* 'frail').[5] Anticipating the discussion of relative iconicity in Section 3.3.2 we may note that even though colour as such may be difficult to depict in speech, there are ways to depict relations between colours by means of relations in sign forms. This does indeed happen, but it is of course highly unlikely that this strategy could scale to accommodate all possibly relevant dimensions of the varieties of sensory experience. This is what Karl Bühler meant when he wrote that sound-symbolism could never form a "coherent representational field" in language (Bühler 1934:203, my translation). To reiterate, there are limits to the iconic representational powers of speech, and there is reason to be careful in ascribing

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5.   To be clear, these words are members of the *form class* of ideophones, a class that is defined (for Siwu) in terms of semantic and structural properties (summarized in Section 2.2) rather than in terms of iconicity.

iconicity to ideophones. (I will come back to the implications of this for the class of ideophones as a whole in Section 4).

With these caveats out of the way, there are still significant regularities in form-meaning mappings to be accounted for in Siwu ideophones, and it is to these regularities that we will now turn.

3.2   Imagic iconicity

Imagic iconicity in ideophones pertains when the sound of the word mimics a sound in the real world. Examples from Siwu include ideophones evoking sounds of collision and explosion (*gbíìm̀* 'explosion [boom]', *kpà* 'dry impact [bang]', *tuu* 'dull impact [thud]'), water-related sounds (*kpɔtsɔkpɔtsɔ* 'water bubbling', *tòlontòlontòlon* 'water dripping'), and other ecologically-relevant sounds (*korrò karrà* 'gnawing bones', *gadàm* 'stamping', *kìrìrì-kìrìrì* 'scratching of claws').

Semiotically, this is the simplest type of mapping; it is probably also the most familiar, as the existence of onomatopoeia is usually granted even by the staunchest proponents of the fundamental arbitrariness of the sign (e.g. Müller 1899; Newmeyer 1992). The simplicity of the mapping brings with it inherent limitations. Firstly, and most obviously, only sound can be represented directly in the modality of speech (imagic iconicity in sign language is therefore another thing altogether); secondly, words employing imagic iconicity are never perfectly faithful copies of the sound mimicked; as conventional linguistic signs they are embedded in the language system and largely dependent on the affordances of its phonemic inventory (this is the relative arbitrariness that, as Saussure famously pointed out, holds even for onomatopoeia).

Numerically, imagic iconicity is of minor importance in the Siwu corpus; only about 8% of the inventory can be classified as directly imitative of sound. (I should note that there are also a handful of nouns of onomatopoeic origin like *kpɔ̀ɔkpɔ̀* 'duck', *ì-fokofoko* 'lung', and *kɛsɛkɛsɛ* 'brush-tailed porcupine', the latter named after the warning rattle it produces with its tail.) Clearly, most Siwu ideophones do not directly imitate sound. But not only are onomatopoeic ideophones relatively rare in Siwu, they also deviate from other ideophones in several ways. For example, they cannot be used as verbs and do not appear in some of the most common ideophonic constructions; and unlike most other ideophones, they do appear in the quotative construction. It seems that this broad distinction between onomatopoetic ideophones and ideophones depicting other types of sensory events reflects a cross-linguistic tendency.[6]

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6.   Cf. for example the basic distinction made in Japanese linguistics between *giongo* (sound-miming ideophones) and *gitaigo* (event-miming ideophones) (Akita 2009). Kilian-Hatz (2001) notes the same broad distinction comparing Baka (an Adamawa language of Cameroon) and Kxoe (a Central Khoisan language from Namibia).

It is worth noting that not all ideophones for acoustic phenomena are necessarily of the imagic iconic type. Take for instance the ideophone *kpɛnɛnɛ* 'shrill, piercing [of sound, especially voice]'. Instead of imitating a particular type of sound, as *gbíìmì* or *tòlontòlon* do, *kpɛnɛnɛ* picks out a psychoacoustic property (roughly, brightness). We get a better feel for its meaning when we consider that it has an antonym *wɔrɔrɔ* 'low, hoarse [of sound, esp. voice]'. The relevant psychoacoustic property seems to be brightness; the correspondence of front vowel /ɛ/ and back vowel /ɔ/ with different shades of brightness has been well documented (Marks 1978: 76–80). This, then, brings us from imagic iconicity – sound mimicking sound – to more complex types of mappings.

3.3   Diagrammatic iconicity

In diagrammatic iconicity, a relation between forms bears a resemblance to a relation between meanings. Diagrammatic iconicity brings with it a wider range of possible mappings because the full range of sensory attributes of speech – including acoustic dimensions, articulatory gestures and temporal unfolding – can be used to suggest meaning. At the same time, in exchanging the direct mapping of sound onto sound for more abstract mappings, we enter the realm of the weakly iconic (Lyons 1977: 103), where the meaning of signs cannot be deduced solely on the basis of their form, even though knowing the meaning we can see some resemblance of form and meaning. Two types of diagrammatic iconicity are found in Siwu ideophones. The first, Gestalt iconicity, holds for individual words, while the other, relative iconicity, plays out in the relations between multiple words and multiple meanings.

3.3.1   *Gestalt iconicity*

Gestalt iconicity involves a resemblance between word structure and (spatio-temporal) structure of the perceived event; or in Bühler's terminology, words that are "Gestalt-faithful" (Bühler 1934: 208, my translation). It is a type of diagrammatic iconicity in that a relation between forms (the parts of the word) has a resemblance to a relation between meanings (in this case parts of the perceived event, that is its aspecto-temporal unfolding).

Gestalt iconicity is most apparent in the word structures of some Siwu ideophones. Fully reduplicated ideophones for example predominantly evoke perceptions of iterated or distributed events, like *mūnyēmūnyē* 'sparkling light', *sàsàsàsà* 'pulsatile release of urine', *biribiri* 'sowed at close intervals', *gidigidi* 'running energetically', *tsɔ̀kwɛtsɔ̀kwɛ* 'irregular sawing motion', *nyɛnɛnɛ* 'shivering' and *kpɔrɔkpɔrɔ* 'drizzling rain'. Monosyllabic ideophones on the other hand often evoke perceptions of unitary events, like *gbíìmì* 'explosion', *dzâ* 'sudden appearance', *kpiɛ* 'careful step of an antelope', *pɔ* 'frog hop', *wãĩ* 'bright flash'. Words of the latter sort cannot be reduplicated, though they

may sometimes be repeated.[7] Monosyllables with an extra-long vowel (marked here by three vowel characters) often depict unitary events that are also durative, like *saaa* 'cool sensation', *ɣàáà* 'flowing quietly without obstruction', *kāáā* 'looking attentively'.

What is common to these examples is that the form of the word betrays something of the perceived event structure. Thus in *mūnyɛ̄mūnyɛ̄* 'twinkling of light' the recurring of the base *mūnyɛ̄* (which cannot occur on its own) corresponds to recurring elements in our perception of the visual pattern; in *dzâ* 'sudden appearance' the unitary form of the ideophone corresponds to the punctual nature of the perceived event; and in *ɣàáà* 'flowing quietly without obstruction' the extra-long vowel corresponds to the durative nature of the perceived event. These regularities appear to be robust for percepts with salient aspecto-temporal structure, such as movement, visual phenomena, and sound.[8]

We have to ask –mindful of our cautionary tale– whether we are not over-eager in ascribing Gestalt iconicity to these examples. Though it is difficult to offer conclusive proof at this point, there are two arguments that can be made. First, it would be rather surprising if the distribution of forms over meanings were reversed, as in *⋆dzâ* 'twinkling of light' and *⋆mūnyɛ̄mūnyɛ̄* 'sudden appearance', or *⋆pɔ* 'shivering' and *⋆nyɛnɛnɛ* 'frog hop'. That is, the distribution of forms over meanings at least in the subset considered seems too skewed to be arbitrary. I leave this as an empirical question, which can be tested along the lines of Klamer's (2002) study of semantically motivated lexical patterns. Secondly, there is a suggestive piece of evidence in the form of the hand gestures that accompany ideophones (Diffloth 1972: 441; Dingemanse 2011: 217–222). For example, in explaining *mūnyɛ̄mūnyɛ̄* 'sparkling of light', speakers make flashing gestures in perfect synchrony with the reduplicated base *⋆mūnyɛ̄*. And in explaining *bɔgɔbɔgɔ* 'resilient', my consultant Ruben Owiafi

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7.   Repetition and reduplication are distinct in Siwu ideophones. In repetition, there are pauses between the repeated tokens (marked here by a comma). Thus, the frog hops '*pɔ, pɔ, pɔ*' and not *pɔpɔpɔ*, and the antelope may walk '*kpiɛ, kpiɛ*' but not *kpiɛkpiɛ* (which happens to be another ideophone – 'sizzling hot').

8.   There is furthermore the possibility that some of the ideophones that do not appear to be transparently iconic in fact reflect perceived event structure. Ideophones might be taken to project a certain cognitive construal of events (cf. Nuckolls' (1995) analogy with cinematic techniques). I hesitate to mention this possibility because circularity is never far away – I might claim that Siwu *ɣèèè* 'animals swarming in great numbers' entails a holistic construal of the swarming event as opposed to a construal that focuses on the pluractionality of the event (in which case we would expect reduplication), chalking it up as another example of Gestalt iconicity, but this would sidestep what is in fact an empirical question. Gesture provides suggestive evidence – *ɣèèè* comes with a single left to right flowing hand gesture – but the issue merits further research and could in fact be a fruitful locus for cross-linguistic investigation. For example, does the Japanese ideophone *uja-uja* 'many small things gathered together and moving' (Gomi 1989: 24), which is reduplicated unlike Siwu *ɣèèè*, entail a construal of a swarming event that focuses more on the plurality?

repeatedly bends an imaginary cane, the bending gestures perfectly aligned with the repetitions of *bɔgɔ. Ideophone and gesture work together to depict imagery of sparkling lights and a resilient cane, respectively.[9]

To summarize, Gestalt iconicity is a weak iconic relationship between form and meaning that is most clear in ideophones evocative of events with salient aspecto-temporal structure.

3.3.2   *Relative iconicity*

Relative iconicity is about mapping a relation between forms onto a relation between meanings. Like Gestalt iconicity, it is a type of diagrammatic iconicity; but unlike Gestalt iconicity, which focuses on the internal structure of signs and meanings, relative iconicity concerns a relation between multiple lexical signs bearing a resemblance to the relation between multiple meanings. Consider, again, *kpɛnɛnɛ* 'high, shrill voice' and *wɔrɔro* 'low, hoarse voice'. In these two signs, the relation between the front vowel /ɛ/ and the back vowel /ɔ/ bears a resemblance to the relation between their objects, a sound high in brightness versus a sound low in brightness (on brightness as a psychoacoustic attribute of sound, see Marks 1978).

There are quite a number of constellations of ideophones showing relative iconicity. The members of such constellations differ minimally from each other in both form and meaning. This can be seen as a form of templatic morphology in that there is a stable segmental skeleton (the template) and a variable part in which members of a sound-symbolic series appear. In (4) for example, the vowel slots in the template *pVmbVlVV* can be occupied by /ɔ/, /u/, or /i/, resulting in different shades of the basic meaning 'protruding (of the belly)'. The stable consonantal skeleton holds together the three ideophones, signifying that they belong to the same domain.

(4)   *pimbilii*
       pumbuluu   'protruding (of the belly)' (/i/ is smallest, /ɔ/ is largest)
       pɔmbɔlɔɔ

Or take the contrast between *foforo-fo* 'lightweight (e.g. as a slim person)' and *fɛfɛrɛ-fɛ* 'very lightweight (e.g. as a feather)', exemplified in (5) and (6) below. The different magnitudes are represented by the relation between front vowel /ɛ/ and the back vowel /o/.

(5)   *ɔ-sò*   *ɔ̀rã̄rã̄,*   *ɔso*   *ɔ̀bra*   *foforofo*
       3SG:PST-lose   weight,   reason 3SG-make IDPH.light
       'she lost weight, so now she is *foforofo* [light]

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(6)   *kàkosɛí*   *ba*   *fɛfɛrɛfɛ*
      paper.piece   have   IDPH.very.light
      'The piece of paper is *fɛfɛrɛfɛ* [very light]'

It is not only vowels that change. In the pair *tsratsratsra* 'fast and light walk' and *dzràdzràdzrà* 'fast and heavy walk' the differences in the weight of the moving figure are represented by the relation between the voiceless palatal affricate /ts/ and its voiced counterpart /dz/ as well as by the difference in tonal melody (high versus low).

Relative iconicity is attested in ideophone inventories all over the world. Westermann (1927) was the first to outline several recurrent relative iconic mappings in the ideophone systems of a number of West-African languages, for example high tones, light vowels and voiceless consonants evoking smallness, clearness, and speed, versus low tones, dark vowels and voiced consonants evoking large size, dullness, and slowness. Since then, mappings like these (especially vowel contrasts) have become one of the most widely researched topics in sound symbolism; useful reviews are Marks (1978) and Hinton, Nichols and Ohala (1994). Many of the cases of relative iconicity in Siwu ideophones have to do with magnitude symbolism and fit the frequency code (Ohala 1994). But there are also cases like *saaa* 'cool sensation (e.g. ginger)' and *suuu* 'burning sensation (e.g. pepper)', in which the different vowel qualities map onto different sensory qualities instead of a scalar attribute like intensity. In such cases there seems to be no reason other than convention why /a/ should go with 'cool' and /u/ with 'burning' (cf. Diffloth 1994), but still the resemblance between the words marks them as being about the same kind of meaning.

In all, about one-fifth of the Siwu ideophone inventory partakes in constellations of relative iconicity.[10] Like primary and Gestalt iconicity, relative iconicity is visible in the Siwu ideophone corpus, but it is by no means a feature of all ideophones.

4.   Beyond lexical iconicity

We have seen a number of different form-meaning mappings in Siwu ideophones. None of them extends over all ideophones in the corpus. Have ideophone enthusiasts (native speakers as well as linguists) simply been over-eager in iconizing ideophones, or is there another reason that the form of ideophones is so often identified with their meaning?

Speakers often self-report that ideophones *feel like* what they evoke; that words like *nyɛnɛnɛnɛ* 'shivering', *vɛlɛvɛlɛ* 'feeling dizzy' and *fututu* 'purely white'

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10.   The majority of these constellations has only two members, like *foforo and fɛfɛrɛ* 'light'/'featherweight' described above; the maximum is 4, the average is 2.4.

are particularly good representations of their meaning in ways that words like *ti* 'to shake', *ɔnyɛ̃* 'sickness' or *yuɛ* 'be green' are not. For *nyɛnɛnɛnɛ* we can point to the similarity in the repeated movement and the repeated syllable and call it Gestalt iconicity. Yet such an account seems less plausible for *vɛlɛvɛlɛ*, which represents an inner sensation with no necessary outward signs, and even less for *fututu*, which represents a colour. What then makes speakers of Siwu feel these words are good evocations of sensory imagery?

Their depictive nature does. Depiction, rather than iconicity, is what invites people to treat the ideophone as a performance of sensory imagery. An analogy may help to explain this point. Consider the category of objects called paintings. Paintings vary quite widely in the degree to which they are iconic (i.e. show a perceived resemblance to what they depict). And yet there is a distinct interpretive frame we bring to all of them: we tend to view them as depictions rather than read them as texts (Gombrich 2002[1960]; Walton 1973).[11] In a similar way, we may think of ideophones as setting up a depictive interpretive frame, inviting the listener onto the scene and invoking images of being there. Their *status aparte* in the stream of speech can be seen as the frame of a painting, their sound as the canvas at which we are invited to 'look' in such a way that we make believe we are actually experiencing the scene depicted. In that sense, the German term *Lautmalerei* (painting in sound) in the early literature on ideophones was remarkably apt – not because ideophones are imitative (a view that doesn't suffice for paintings nor for ideophones) but because they invite the listener to savour them as depictions. If we want to invoke iconicity here at all, we should call it COERCED ICONICITY. The depictive nature of the ideophone coerces us into treating the word as an adequate rendition of the depicted event.

There is some suggestive evidence from experiments carried out by Kimi Akita (Akita 2009; this volume) to support this point. Akita investigated sound symbolic interpretations of ideophones and non-ideophones. In one experiment, speakers of Japanese rated novel words for size of the imagined referent. Consonant voicing, vowel quality and morphophonological similarity to ideophones were systematically varied in the novel words. In a follow-up experiment, the novel words were placed in a sentential frame that specified part of their meaning. The results suggest that subjects were more inclined to 'see' magnitude symbolism in novel words that sounded like ideophones than in novel words that sounded like ordinary words; and the effect was

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11.   Many of the oppositions stressing the special status of ideophones – commentative vs. presentive (Kunene 1965), prosaic vs. expressive (Diffloth 1972), discursive vs. performative (Nuckolls 1995), descriptive vs. mimetic (Güldemann 2008), to sample a few – point to this crucial difference in mode of representation.

strongest for ideophone-like words presented in an ideophonic construction. In terms of the present discussion, people were most inclined to see form-meaning mappings in novel words when they were presented as depictions. Although this experimental finding speaks to existing words only indirectly, it does underline the importance of framing ideophones as depictions.

5.   Concluding remarks

"The problem of the word," wrote Pound, "cannot be exhausted in a single lifetime" (1973: 321). All through his life Pound displayed a deep interest in how different languages and ecologies may afford different types of poetics. This interest formed the backdrop to his fascination with Chinese ideographic writing and his wonder over exotic languages. He was obviously impressed by Lévy-Bruhl's *Les Fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures*, and his work contains several allusions to Lévy-Bruhl's characterizations of non-Western language structures. The *ABC of Reading* mentions "primitive languages in Africa […] that are still bound up with mimicry and gesture" (1934: 21). This is an allusion to Lévy-Bruhl's (1910: 183–6) summary of a description of Ewe ideophones by the eminent linguist Diedrich Westermann (1907: 83–5, 129–30). It is the closest Pound has ever been to ideophones, and it is unfortunate (though probably inevitable) that the meeting had to take place on the unholy ground of scientific racism and cultural evolutionism. I will not rehearse the arguments against these views. My point in this paper has rather been to provide a characterization of these ill-understood words that resonates with Pound ideas about the poetic word and that is more fertile from the point of view of the study of semiotics and verbal art.

I have shown how different types of iconicity allow ideophones to move beyond the imitation of singular events towards perceptual analogies and generalizations of event structure; and I have argued that even though not all ideophones are transparently iconic, they do all set up a depictive interpretive frame, inviting listeners to 'be there'. Ideophones are akin to Pound's luminous details in that they focus on presentation rather than commentary. Evocative and defiant, they remind one of a memorable passage from Pound's interpretation of the Confucian writings:

> Intangible and abstruse
> the bright silk of the sunlight
> Pours down in manifest splendor,
> You can neither stroke
> the precise word with your hand
> Nor shut it down under a box-lid.   (Pound 1969: 133)

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