

Ideophones and the nature of the adjective word class in Ewe*

Felix K. Ameka

Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics
and Leiden University

1. Introduction

In his overview of African ideophones, Childs (1994:197) notes that one of the issues that remains “[Still] to be scrutinized is the exact nature of the relationship between ideophones and the rest of the language, as well as the place of ideophones in a language.” The present paper seeks to contribute to this topic of research by examining the consequences the place given to ideophones in a language description has for typological generalizations about that language. I argue that one can arrive at different generalizations about the nature of the adjective word class in a language depending on the place of ideophones in the language. I illustrate the point with data from Ewe, a Kwa language of West Africa. I explore the implications of ignoring ideophones for our understanding of the structuring of conceptual domains such as color in the language. Furthermore, I argue that contrary to being peripheral elements, ideophones form an integral part of the languages in which they occur and they should therefore not be ignored, but should be considered in their typological characterizations.

Research on ideophones is beset with problems of finding a cross-linguistically valid definition for the term ‘ideophone’ and its progress has been hampered by emphasizing the peripheral and the irregular nature of ideophones. A way forward, it seems to me, is to attempt to discover correlations between the properties that have been documented for ideophones in specific languages and the linguistic type of these languages. In other words, it appears that some of the properties of ideophones that have been noted in the literature apply only to certain language types and others to languages of other types. To give a rather trivial example, a morphological property that has been noted for ideophones in description after description is that “ideophones display very little morphology” (Childs 1994: 185).

