

The social importance of a word category: evidence from African ideophones

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Ideophones have proven to be a vexed word category, particularly as they have been analyzed in African languages. A basic question is whether they indeed constitute a distinct word category separate from (manner) adverbs, verbs, and even nouns. Their phonetics, phonology, and even morphology have also proven to be problematic, let alone their semantics and pragmatics. Because of their often extremely tight collocational restrictions, typically with verbs – they sometimes appear with only one – ideophones are often said just to underscore the meaning of the verb. The basis for many of these problems lies in their extreme variation, across dialects, within dialects, between individuals, and even within individuals. They are not known to the same extent by fully competent speakers of the language, nor are they necessarily shared across all speakers. Much of their variation may be attributable to their performing an expressive function, thus subject to individual, psychological factors. Much may also be attributable to their restriction to certain genres, folk tales and narratives, where meaning is often negotiated between speaker and audience. Nonetheless, some explanation for their distribution lies in their association with what has been called "local identity", a somewhat amorphous concept often characterized as being a member of the local team or participating in dense and multiplex networks, a claim I will evaluate in this paper. The evidence used to support this claim comes from at least these three sources:

African (extended) pidgins and urban varieties
Gbeya ideophone variation
Zulu "knowledge" of (Zulu) ideophones

I will also adduce some evidence from recent preliminary work on Mende.