

What do we really know about ideophones? Ideophone usage in a corpus of natural discourse in Siwu (Kwa, eastern Ghana)

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Ideophones (Voeltz and Kilian-Hatz 2001) are marked words that vividly depict perceptions and sensations. Previous studies of ideophones have focused almost exclusively on the form of ideophones to the neglect of their function. This has led to a situation in which we know a lot about linguistic properties of ideophones (phonology, morphology, sound-symbolism, syntax), but considerably less about their actual use in discourse. This paper presents results of an ongoing research project into the linguistic and cultural ecology of ideophones in Siwu, a Ghana-Togo-Mountain language spoken north of Hohoe in Ghana's Volta Region. Of central interest to the project is the role played by ideophones in the discursive practices of the Mawu. A range of methods is used to investigate this issue (including elicitation tasks and collections of folk-definitions), but this paper will focus on natural data from a video corpus of discourse.

Ideophones occur across a wide variety of speech genres in Siwu, including greeting exchanges, conversations, arguments, insults, narratives, and special genres like funeral dirges (*sikubiɛnɔ*), riddles (*mɪdzòlo*), and recreational songs (*ilikpi*). I will argue that ideophones are more than an expressive form of language used to spice up narratives. Drawing from a variety of videotaped examples, I will show that ideophones are firmly rooted in daily languaging, and that they are being put to many uses and adapted to different genres. The analysis of ideophones in day-to-day discourse throws light on the interplay of language, culture and the perceptual world in Mawu society, and brings us a little closer to an understanding of the use of ideophony in the world's languages.