

Ideophones in Wan narratives: A data-driven approach

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This study explores the properties of ideophones in Wan (ISO 639-3: wan), a Southeastern Mande language spoken in Côte d'Ivoire, based on the data from a corpus of traditional narratives. Building on earlier descriptive studies (Ameka 2001; Newman 1968; Childs 1988; Akita and Dingemanse 2019), we seek to develop a new approach to identifying ideophones and their properties, focusing in particular on their meaning, syntactic restrictions on their use, and their compatibility with other lexical items.

We start by analysing the morphosyntactic behavior of ideophones in Wan and contrasting it to that of other lexical classes. We arrive at a language-specific definition of Wan ideophones as well as a general methodology for defining the class of ideophones that can be applied across languages. We believe that such a methodology is beneficial in particular to non-native speakers engaged in the challenging task of describing ideophones of the language “in its own terms”.

The study's primary aim is to develop a data-driven approach that avoids assuming pre-existing definitions or ad hoc classifications. As our starting point, we rely on a database of 320 naturally occurring examples extracted from a corpus, featuring 140 ideophone types. Each token was annotated its position in the clause, morphophonological properties such as reduplication, and co-occurrence with specific types of semantically related verbs and nouns. The examples were cross-checked with a native speaker consultant to ensure accuracy of our interpretation of the particular uses. Based on these annotations we arrive at natural classes of ideophones that turn out to only partially replicate the existing semantic classifications intended to capture ideophones' cross-linguistic diversity (Dhoorre and Tosco 1998; Hoey 2024, 22; Watson 2001, 394), including the implicational hierarchy proposed by Dingemanse (Dingemanse 2012: 663).

We further explore correlations between the meaning of ideophones and their phonetic form, revealing in particular associations between the ideophone's form and the aspectual properties of the corresponding event.

The results of the study illustrate the advantages as well as the challenges of a data-driven approach and highlight the importance of developing cross-linguistically applicable methods for the study of ideophones.

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