

Ideophones in Mizo

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I. IDEOPHONES

David Crystal defines ideophones as “a term used in linguistics and phonetics for any vivid representation of an idea in sound, such as occurs through onomatopoeia”. (189). In a narrower but more helpful view, ideophones are expressives, characterising sounds, sensations, textures and feelings, usually, but not always, through morphological patterning. In many languages, ideophones have distinctive phonotactics. Ideophones do always have highly specific applications to the sensory world and describe visual, aural and emotional experiences in ways hardly paralleled elsewhere in the lexicon. They have a tendency to fill an adverb-like slot. One more term used in this respect is Mimesis. As stated by Shinji Ghaeyri Ido in “Turkish Mimetic Word-Formation” it is a term “used for mimetic words that comprise not only sound imitating words (or phonomimes), but also psychomimes and phenomimes which imitate psychological state and manner, respectively” (67). Blench defines ideophones

“as expressives, characterising sounds, sensations, textures and feelings, usually, but not always, through morphological patterning.” He further states that “In many languages, ideophones have distinctive phonotactics, but they always have highly specific applications to the sensory world and describe visual, aural and emotional experiences in ways hardly paralleled elsewhere in the lexicon.” (1)

Saussure said that language may have some pre-linguistic and pre-cultural relationship to sound, but that by the time we call the sound "Language", that relationship is so arbitrary that iconicity is no longer important or motivating. “The word arbitrary also calls for comment. The term should not imply that the choice of the signifier is left entirely to the speaker (we shall see below that the individual does not have the power to change a sign in any way once it has become established in the linguistic community); I mean that it is unmotivated, i.e. arbitrary in that it actually has no natural connection with the signified” (Saussure 69).

Deborah L. Cole said that ideophones can draw on elements from onomatopoeic, synesthetic, and conventional sound symbolism. If an ideophone is onomatopoeic, it represents environmental sounds in an imitative way. (Animal sounds like "oink" and "meow" are examples of onomatopoeia in English.) If an ideophone is synesthetic, it will be an acoustic symbolization of non-acoustic phenomena. For example, vowels are lengthened while pronouncing to stress the importance given by the speaker or the appearance of the things described. If an ideophone can be described as conventional sound symbolism, there will be an analogical relationship between language specific phoneme clusters and meaning. (An example of this is the use of the cluster 'sl' in English to represent things that are wet or do not have much friction as in 'slippery', 'slick', 'slide' and 'slimy') or the use of 'gl' to represent things that are shiny as in 'glitter', 'glisten', 'glow', 'gleam', 'glimmer', etc

Mizo has a large register of words which are termed as sound symbolic or mimetic which are called ideophones in linguistics. These words are not just imitating the sound as being onomatopoeic, but they involve a much wider range of meaning and description. In fact, many ideophones in Mizo are used for things that do not make a sound or noise but suggest action, state of being and psychological state and manner.

Based on the study of Hinton, et. al. (1-6), the different types of sounds produced by human beings voluntarily and even involuntarily can be represented as shown in the table below

Examples of types of sounds

Involuntary Sounds	Corporeal Sound Symbolism	Onomatopoeia	Synesthesia	Conventional Sound Symbolism	Developed language
Sneezing, hiccupping	Purposefully clearing one's throat	Swish Bang Smack	Low voice and vowel lengthening to represent large objects	'gl' in glitter, glisten, glow, glimmer	Most words in language. Eg. Dog, sit

Hinton, et. al.

There can be different ways of classifying ideophones. For this study, the sound symbolic words in Mizo will be classified under the following categories as classified by M. Shibatani (154):

- a) Animate phonomime
- b) Inanimate phonomime
- c) Phenomime
- d) Psychomime

Animate Phonomime – Animate phonomimes mimic the voice of things, the voice of people and animals. There are many animate phonomime in Mizo which will be explained by giving examples and showing how they are used.

The sounds made by animals and humans and the names given to animals according to the sounds they made –

- a) Miau – It mimics the sound made by cats and the term ‘miau miau’ is often used by children to refer to the animal making that sound, which is the cat. The term ‘ngiau’ is also used for mimicking the sound made by cats
- b) Bauh – It mimics the sound made by dogs and the term ‘bauh bauh’ is used by children to refer to dogs
- c) Ti-ti-ik-ik – It mimics the sound made by roosters and it is also used to refer to the animal making that sound.
- d) Kak – The name given to the sound made by ducks
- e) Chiap – It mimics the sound made by chicken and the term ‘chiap chiap’ is used by children to refer to chicken
- f) Tuk – It refers to the sound made by a hen with chicken, the sound of a hen calling the chicken
- g) Nguk/Ngek – It mimics the sound made by pigs
- h) Bu – It mimics the sound made by cows and buffaloes and ‘bu bu’ is sometimes used to refer to the animal
- i) Be – It mimics the sound made by goats and lambs and ‘be be’ is used to refer to lambs
- j) Dawk-daw-lak – The sound made by a hen while laying eggs
- k) Huk – The crying sound of a deer
- l) Ungau – The cry of a wild cat
- m) Uṭawk – A toad (Lorrain 220). Onomatopoeic of the sound made by some species of toads
- n) Chingpirinu – The name of a large owl (75). The name mimics the sound made by the bird
- o) Thangfenpabawp – The name mimics the sound made by the bird
- p) Tuitu – The name mimics the sound made by the bird
- q) Tuklo – Species of a woodpecker (216). The name mimics the sound made by the bird
- r) Vaiva – The hill mainah (221). The name mimics the sound made by the bird
- s) Kangkang – The name mimics the sound made by the bird
- t) Awke/Chawke – The name given to the gecko, mimicking the sound made by the animal
- u) Choak – The name given to the crow, mimicking the sound made by the bird
- v) Hauhuk – The name given to ‘a black ape, a species of gibbon’ (93), mimicking the sound made by the animal
- w) Huk/Hahum – The roaring sound made by tigers/lions
- x) Rum – The gnarling sound made by animals when they are angry or in pain. The sound made by human beings when in pain
- y) Faifuk/Saisik – Whistling
- z) Su – The hissing sound made by snakes
- aa) U – The crying sound made by dogs, foxes and jackals. It can be used as ‘Sihal/Ui an u chiam mai’ (The dogs are crying out loud)
- bb) Vi – The flying sound made by mosquitoes
- cc) Chik/Ngik – The sound made by rodents and such similar sounding sounds made by other animals and insects.
- dd) Hnit/Sut – The sound made while blowing out air through the nostrils
- ee) Khuh – Coughing
- ff) Hahchhiau – Sneezing
- gg) Thui – To spit. To spit at someone abusively
- hh) Luak – Vomiting. The name is associated with the sound made while vomiting.
- ii) Uak – The sound made while vomiting

Inanimate Phonomime – Inanimate phonomimes mimic the sound of inanimate things, the sounds made by anything that is not alive

The names given to instruments from the sound they made and the sounds made by machines, objects and instruments are:

- a) Ṭingṭang (N) – The guitar. A good example of mimetic word formation, where the name is given according to the sound made by the instrument
- b) Tawtawrawt (N) – The trumpet. Another good example of mimetic word formation
- c) Dup – This is used to refer to the thudding sound made by instruments like guns, drums, bass guitars, etc. It refers to a deep and low sound.

Eg – Silai a puak/ri dup mai (Sound of a gun)

Khuang an vaw ri dup/ dup dup mai (Sound of a drum, a low and deep sounding drum being beaten)

Ṭingṭang a perh ri dup/dup dup mai (Low sound of a guitar)

- d) Dur – Describing a large sound, especially sounds made by bombs and thunder. The sound being lengthened a bit
- e) Dum – Loud and deep sound made by big guns, big drums and the sound being made by such instruments is elongated
- f) Ṭhak – Sounds like the clapping of the palm, an open sound made by two objects hitting at each other. Sounds that ended abruptly
- g) Ṭhek – A smaller sound as compared to ṭhak and the instruments or materials making that sound will also be smaller than that of ṭhak
- h) Pup – Deep sound that seems to come out from something hollow
- i) Ṭhuai
- j) Ṭhiai
- k) Pawp -
- l) Pap –
- m) Phawrh -
- n) Thlawp –
- o) Thlup -
- p) Thlap -
- q) Thlep
- r) Thlurh –
- s) Tuarh -
- t) Khup -
- u) Khap -
- v) Khep -
- w) Kauh -
- x) Keuh -
- y) Rup
- z) Rap
- aa) Rep
- bb) Tlung
- cc) Tlang
- dd) Tleng
- ee) Chawrh
- ff) Charh
- gg) Cherh
- hh) Hrawk
- ii) Buai –
- jj) Nuai -

These are all inanimate phonomimes and they represent the type of sounds produced and the manner in which they are produced. It is however difficult to give explanation in detail or give a description of every sounds. It must be noted that the mimetic words given to represent sounds made by different objects and instruments under different conditions are named according to the sound they produced and also according to the instruments used for producing the sound. A native speaker will understand how the different sounds will be produced. Mizo being a tonal language, and the tone markers yet to be developed, it is not possible to give the phonetic equivalent of these different sounds. It will be necessary to get an auditory help to understand how these sounds are produced.

Phenomime – Phenomimes mimic or imitated the state of things, how they look, smells, develop, act and behave, how things are done and how actions develop. Mizo is rich in phenomime and examples could be cited in different ways. Some instances of phenomimes in Mizo are:

- 1) Describing action (animate)
 - a) Nui (Smile/Laugh) – *sen sen, ver ver, chen chen* are used in a positive manner, describing the pleasant way in which someone smiles. *Kur kur, Ker ker, sun sun, seng sung, chun chun, chur chur, ver vur, vur vur, uar uar, huah huah, hui* are used in a manner which is not pleasant, which could sometimes be rude or sometimes could show the unpolished manner of the person who is smiling or laughing. *Hawk hawk, huah huah* could be used to describe the intensity of smiling or laughing.
 - b) Kal (Walk) – *vah vah, vawh vawh, fua fua, ziai ziai, zut zut, zet zet, chhut chhut, chhet chhet, boh boh, tlawih tlawih, thuak thuak, thauh thauh, thap thap, thep thep, thup thup, thang thang, hawh hawh, dan dan, den den, dun dun, dul dul, hul hul, dum dum*, etc describe the manner in which a person is walking, whether the person is walking gracefully, hurriedly, the quantity of those who are walking as a group and the manner in which they are walking, it could also be used to describe the stature of the person who is walking
 - c) Zai (Sing) – *vang vang, vawng vawng, veng veng, hlarh hlarh, hlerh hlerh, hlurh hlurh, tleng tleng, tlung tlung, tang tang, awr awr, dem dem, dap dap*, etc. are used to describe the manner of singing, the mood and tone in which the singer is singing, the passion of the singer, the psychological state of the singer, etc
 - d) Tlan (Run) – *fua fua, nal nal, zuk zuk, zawk zawk, dul dul, dam dam, dum dum, hum hum, hul hul*, are used to describe how fast the runner is, the manner of running, the quantity of runners, etc
 - e) Zuang (Jump/Hop) – *zek zek, zak zak, zuk zuk, thoh thoh, thauh thauh, theuh theuh*, etc describe the physical appearance of the jumper and the manner in which the jumper is jumping. It can be used for describing human beings and animals
 - f) Lam (Dance) – *darh darh, dah dah, derh derh, dawrh dawrh, durh durh, hluau hluau, mup mup*, describe the nature and manner of dancing employed by the dancer, the physical stature of the dancer, the skill of the dancer and the quantity of dancers are represented by the different terms used. *Mup mup* is used to refer to dancing in group only
 - g) Thu (sit) – *thap, thep, thup, thupap, cham put, dul, nghuk, nghiai* describe the manner in which a person or group of persons sit
 - h) Ngawi (be quiet) – *thap, thep, thup, thupap, thiap, dak, duk, dek, hmak, hmun, hman, hmawn*, describe the condition and the manner of the person or the group becoming quiet. They also describe the state of mind and the psychological state of the person or group
 - i) Te (Scream) – *rawng rawng, ruai ruai, tuarh tuarh, ruah ruah, duar duar, duai duai, teng tung, thawt*, describe the manner, loudness and the seriousness of the person who is screaming
 - j) Thinphu (heartbeat) – *dup dup, dap dap, dep dep, zawih zawih* describe the manner in which the heart beats and the physical and psychological condition of the person whose heart is beating
 - k) Vawih (Farting) – *pang, pawng, pung, peng, put, pet, pit, pherh pherh, phurh phurh, pawp pawp, tawt, tet, tut, thlurh thlurh, thlerh thlerh, thawp sat*, describe the manner in which someone farts. The loudness, the duration and the sound made by the action are described by the different ideophones associated with farting.
- 2) Describing action (inanimate)
 - a) Thli thaw (the blowing of the wind) – *veng veng, vuk vuk, heuh heuh, hem hem, hum hum* describe the manner in which the wind is blowing, how strong and powerful it is.
 - b) Tui luang (The flowing of water in stream, ocean, etc) – *del del, dem dem, dul dul, dum dum, heuh heuh, hiau hiau, hum hum, huau huau, ker ker, hum hum, delh delh*, etc are words describing the manner in which the water is flowing and the sound made by the water.
 - c) Ruah sur (Rain falling) – *buan buan, seng seng, hmi, phingphisiau*, express the intensity and quantity of rainfall. For instance, *ruah sur buan buan* is a heavy downpour while *ruah sur seng seng* is a little shower
 - d) Thingkung/Thingzar (Branches of a tree) – *kur siau siau, kur suau suau* convey the manner in which the branches of the tree is moving
 - e) Motor tlan (The moving and running of vehicles on the street – *boh boh, hum hum, del del, zar zar, zuai zuai, dul dul*, illustrate the manner in which the vehicles are moving and the quantity of vehicles moving in group. It could be used to express the condition of the road on which the vehicle is running
- 3) Describing appearance (animate). These words are used to describe the appearance, the physical stature and posture of the person being referred to
 - a) Sang (tall) – *ek uak, iak uak, zit zet, zet zut, zir zer, zer zuar, thlirh thlerh, thlerh thlawrh*,
 - b) Tawi (Short) – *tip tep, tep tup, tim tem, terh tawrh, terh turh*,
 - c) Cher (thin in nature) – *din den, din dan, dik dek, thik thiak, thiak thuak, gin gen, gen gawn*,
 - d) Thau (fat) – *king keng, keng kung, mit met, met mut, mut mut, eng ung, pem pum, ping peng, peng pung*

- e) Ngo (fair skin) – pik piak, pek puak, phik phek, phek phuk, dip dep, dep dup, vir ver, ver vur
- f) Hang (dark skin) – chel chul, thil thel, thel thul, thik thek, ril rel, nil nel, nel nul, mawk, beh
- g) Thu (dark skin) – thik thek, thil thel
- h) Chhe (imperative mood of *chhia* which means not good) – seng sung, bir ber, ber bur, bet but, bem bum, boh boh, ziar zuar, zir zer, zer zur, din den, den dun, beuh boh, chhet chhut, chip chep, chet chut, iak uak, ver vur, țing țeng, țeng țung,
- i) Ria (Thin) – Țhik Țhiak, țhel țhawl, țhiu țhiau, țhil țhel
- j) Mum (Fat) – mit met, met mut, pil pel, pel pul,
- k) Chum (Fat) – bit bet, bet but, mit met, met mut,
- l) Mam (smooth surface) – pir per, per pur, thin then, then thun, zir zer, zer zur, zin zen, zen zun,
- m) Pial (smooth and slippery) – pil pel, pel pul, thin then, then thun
- n) Bawl (bulging, especially on the skin) - țik țek, țek țuk, hriap hruap, hrep hrup
- o) Thap (rough and uneven) – hrep hrup, hriap hruap
- p) Nalh (neat and tidy) – thlirh thlerh, thlerh thlawrh, thlap thlap, thlip thlep, thlep thlawp, zeih zawih, zaih zaih,
- q) Thur (rough haired) – bim bem, bem bum, chher chhur
- 4) Describing appearance (inanimate)
- a) Tle (Glitter) – sat sat, sar sar, sit set, siu siau, vir ver, ver vur, vit vet, vat vat, ver ver, var var, hliir hlerh, hlerh hlurh, hliu hliau, vat, sar,
- b) Sen (Red) – vit vet, vet vut, vet vet, vel vul, veng vung, thir ther, ther thur, thik thek, thek thuk, hliir hler, hler hlur, hlar hlar
- c) Eng (yellow) – pip pep, pep pup, piap puap,
- d) Hring (green) – dip dep, dep dup, nghilh nghelh, nghelh nghulh,
- e) Var (White) – vir ver, ver vur, per pur, pip pep, pep pup,
- f) Dal (Pale) – dip dep, dek duk, ri riari,
- g) Dum (Black) – thil thel, thel thul
- h) Paw (opaque) – thik thek, thek thuk, thel thual, theng thung, ri riari, rei ruai, chik chek, chek chuk
- i) Buang (Brownish) – thik thek, thek thuk, thing theng, theng thung
- j) Rang/Țial (multi colored) – ri riari, rei ruai, rik rek, rek ruk, biai buai
- k) Zum (Pointed) – vit vet, vet vut, vir ver, vat vat, pit pat, pet put
- l) Huh (wet) – pir per, per pur, zeih zuih, hlim hliam, hlem hluam, chip chep, chep chup, chiap chuap,
- m) Hul (dry) – phik phek, phek phuk, hil hel, hel hul, hik hek, hek huk,
- n) Ro (dry) – ri re, re ru, rim rem, rem rum, rip rep, rep rup, bim bem, bem bum, țhip țhep, țhep țhup, țhep țhuap
- o) Nal (Slippery) – zik zek, zek zuk, zil zel, zel zul, pit piat, pet puat,
- p) Thap, mam, bawl, pial are also used to refer to the appearance or state of inanimate objects
- q) Eng (Light) – phit phet, phet phut, pep pup, uarh, pup, ve ve, ri re,
- r) Thim (Dark) – rik rek, rek ruk,
- s) Bial (Circle/round) – pip pep, pep pup, pim pem, pem pum, kirh kerh, kerh kurh, keng kung
- t) Sawl (Oval) – peu puau, pet put, zit zet, zet zut
- 5) Describing condition or state of being –
- a) Lek lek –
- b) Che che –
- c) Țawk Țawk –
- d) Țek țek –
- e) De de –
- f) Ve ve –
- g) Riari riari –
- h) Chiai chiai –
- i) Dawn dawn –
- j) Thuak thuak –
- k) Larh larh –
- l) Vauh vauh –
- m) Dauh dauh –
- n) Dek dek –

Psychomime – Pyschomime mimics or imitates emotions or the way someone feel. Let us look at instances of psychomime in Mizo with the following examples:

- a) Tum bur, tum bar and tum ber² – *Tum* is to show a sad face. The words bur, bar and ber are psychomimes describing the nature in which the person shows his sad face and is also used for describing the appearance of the person who is showing a sad face. '*A tum bur mai*' is normally used for describing a big person, '*a tum bar mai*' is used for describing an average sized person, '*a tum ber mai*' is used to describe a person small in size. On the other hand, '*a tum bur mai*' is also used to describe the intensity of showing a sad face and it is used to describe a most serious sad face. '*A tum bar mai*' is describing a lesser intensity of sad face as compared to '*tum bur*'. '*A tum ber mai*' is used to describe the least intensity of showing a sad face. The ideophones *bur*, *bar* and *ber* are also used with *Ngui*, which is another term for being sad and showing a sad face.
- Ideophones *bur*, *bar*, *bam*, *bem* and *ber*, etc are used in other situations also. In Mizo, *mu* is a verb which means sleep. If we say '*a mu bur mai*', it means the person sleeping is big, and it can also mean that he is not in a happy state. '*A mu bam/bem mai*' means the person sleeping is not that big and it is also used to refer sympathizingly about someone who is sleeping because s/he is not well.
- b) Chapo ber ber, chapo bar bar, chapo bur bur, chapo ber bur – *Chapo* means proud and the ideophones used for describing the person who is proud. They are used for describing the size of the person being referred to and the way in which the person is showing how proud he/she is
- c) *Mit terh* is to have a sore and watery eye. If it is used as '*A mit a terh zek mai*' it means we are referring to someone small in size but if it is used as '*A mit a terh zuk mai*', we are talking about someone who is large in size and that the sore eye is in a bad condition
- d) Inngaitlawm dik dek, inngaitlawm dek duk – *Inngaitlawm* means being humble or modest. *Dik dek* and *dek duk* are used to describe the state of the person who is humble.
- e) Nui seng, nui sung, nui sen sen, nui huau huau, nui chen chen, nui chun chun, nui vur vur, nui ver ver, etc – *Nui* means smile. *Nui seng*, *nui ver ver* and *nui sen sen* are used in a positive nature describing the person who is smiling as lovely and sweet. *Nui sung*, *nui sun sun* and *nui huau huau*, *nui vur vur*, *nui chun chun*, etc are used for describing someone in a comical manner, not a very polished manner of laughing, and a rude way of laughing.
- f) Hlim ver ver, hlim vur vur, etc – *Hlim* is the state of being happy. *Ver ver* and *vur vur* add attributes to describe how happy the person is, her/his appearance and how s/he exposes her/his happiness

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