
Ideophones and iconicity in Korean and Thai

Kyungeun Park¹, Kewalin Simuang¹, Kultida Khammee² &
Seongha Rhee^{1,3}

¹*Hankuk University of Foreign Studies*, ²*University of Phayao*,

³*Liberal Arts, Mahidol University*

kyungeunpark@hufs.ac.kr, smkewalin@hufs.ac.kr,

annenfants@gmail.com, srhee@hufs.ac.kr

Korean has a large inventory of ideophones, built on sound symbolism, involving vowel polarity, consonantal tensing and aspiration, and reduplication, the manipulation of which enables lexicalization of diverse sensations, either physical or psychological. Vowel polarity operates on the opposition between the so-called ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ vowels (Rhee & Koo 2017). Consonantal manipulation operates on the tripartite contrasts among plain, tensed, and aspirated phonetic qualities (Koo 2007). Reduplication iconically encodes multiplicity of events. Korean ideophony is widely attested across multiple sensory domains such as vision, audition, gustation, olfaction, etc., strongly pointing to synesthetic perception.

Thai has a modest but smaller inventory of ideophones as compared to Korean, mostly onomatopoeia. Though smaller in size than the Korean system, Thai ideophony also makes use of elegant sound symbolism by vowels (Thongkum 1979), consonants (Rungrojsuwan 2007), and tones (Naksakul 1998), as well as reduplication.

A comparative analysis shows that the two languages have commonalities in ideophone lexicalization strategies, in particular, those tied to the manner of articulation of the sounds involved reflecting the target stimulus’s physical properties such as trailing, decay, amplification, resonance, intensity, among others. When such characteristics coincide, individual ideophones often have similar sounds in their lexicalization. As such these strategies are highly iconic in that lexicalization of sensory perception directly reflects the properties of articulation. Despite the presence of many commonalities, however, the two languages differ in a number of significant ways in detail, many relating to their typological differences and different perceptions of the events being described. Some differences may putatively be due to language-specific idiosyncrasies.

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