

## IDEOPHONES FROM A SYNTACTIC POINT OF VIEW

PAUL NEWMAN

Most studies of ideophones focus almost exclusively on the phonological and semantic features of these words.<sup>1</sup> An exception is William J. Samarin's paper, 'Perspective on African ideophones', which raises important questions about their grammatical function.<sup>2</sup> In the present paper, I propose to follow up Samarin's work by presenting an alternative syntactic treatment of ideophones which accounts for their grammatical properties while also recognizing their phonological/semantic distinctiveness.

Traditional definitions of the ideophone were intended to be applicable in whatever language these words might be found. The assumption was that ideophones in all (African) languages had sufficient features in common so that they could be characterized independent of reference to any particular language. An example of semantic generalization about ideophones is Cole's characterization of them as 'descriptive of sound, colour, smell, manner, appearance, state, action or intensity . . . [that is] vivid vocal images or representations of visual, auditory and other sensory or mental experiences'.<sup>3</sup> Fortune has described phonological characteristics that are equally important in setting ideophones apart from 'normal speech'.<sup>4</sup> Such features are the use of phonemic segments not found elsewhere in the language, distinct phonotactics, the use of expressive intonation, and the relative freedom of replacement of a segment by some other segment without altering the meaning of the word. Cole's and Fortune's observations can be combined to provide a single succinct definition of 'ideophone' as a phonologically peculiar set of descriptive or qualificative words.<sup>5</sup> Such a definition is, of course, vague and unformalized, but it gives a common frame of reference in discussing African languages.

Approaching the matter syntactically, Samarin has argued that the question "Exactly what are the ideophones?" . . . must be answered for only one language at a time in the same way that all other morpheme or word classes are investigated.<sup>6</sup> Samarin's argument is that the term 'ideophone' denotes a morpheme class and thus its characterization must be language specific. Given the trilogy form, function, and content (corresponding to phonology, syntax, and semantics), Samarin insists that the definition of the ideophone must be made on the basis of function within a specific language, disregarding form and content. He does not justify this imperative but it is clear that Samarin thinks that a func-

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, P. Alexandre, 'Préliminaire à une présentation des idéophones bulu', in J. Lukas (ed.), *NEUE AFRIKANISTISCHE STUDIEN* (Hamburg, 1966), pp. 9-28; G. Ansre, *THE TONAL STRUCTURE OF EWE* (Hartford, 1961); D. Fivaz, *SOME ASPECTS OF THE IDEOPHONE IN ZULU* (Hartford, 1963); G. Fortune, *IDEOPHONES IN SHONA* (London, 1962); W. J. Samarin, 'Determining the meanings of ideophones', *J.W.A.L.* vol. IV, no. 2 (1967), pp. 35-41; K. Williamson, *A GRAMMAR OF THE KOLOKUMA DIALECT OF IJO* (Cambridge, 1965).

<sup>2</sup> *AFRICAN STUDIES*, vol. XXIV (1965), pp. 117-21.

<sup>3</sup> D. T. Cole, *AN INTRODUCTION TO TSWANA GRAMMAR* (Capetown, 1955), p. 370.

<sup>4</sup> Fortune, *IDEOPHONES* . . .

<sup>5</sup> It should be emphasized that the phonological distinctiveness of ideophones is a property of the set as a whole and not necessarily of each member of that set.

<sup>6</sup> 'Perspective . . .', p. 117.

