

## On Etulo ideophones

Adaobi Ngozi Okoye <sup>1</sup>, Martha Chidimma Egenti <sup>2</sup>

*Department of Linguistics Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka*

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**Abstract:** *On the basis of the initial definition of ideophone as vivid representation of an idea in sound which may be described as predicate, qualificative or adverbial in respect to manner, colour, smell, action, state or intensity (Doke, 1935:118), the paper is aimed at exploring some of these features in Etulo language which is an endangered minority language spoken in Benue State, Nigeria. Primary data were collected from native speakers of Etulo language resident in Adi, Buruku Local Government Area of Benue State through the use of digital recorders. The paper examines the identified ideophones along the line of the features of ideophones that have been identified cross-linguistically in the literature. The following findings could be confirmed for ideophones in Etulo. First, ideophones perform both adverbial and adjectival functions in the language. Secondly, tonally, there is preponderance of low tone than high tone. Thirdly, in terms of their syllabic structure, Etulo ideophones adhere to the syllable structure of the language, and partial and full reduplication can also be confirmed.*

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### I. Introduction

Ideophone constitutes a distinct word category whose major purpose is to convey meaning on the basis of its sound and patterns. Ideophones in African languages have received adequate attention in the literature following Doke (1935) seminal work. These studies span different linguistic perspectives such as phonological, morphological, semantic and syntactic levels. For instance, Maduka has extensively studied it from phonosemantic perspective (1982, 1983-4, 1988, 1991, 1992) and Ayowale (1983, 1984 e.t.c.). Some other scholars have analyzed their distributional patterns and functions as well as the phonological properties of ideophones. Uchekukwu (2007) identifies the pairing of ideophones in Igbo to show contrast with regard to its tone and meaning. He calls this phenomenon ‘ideophonic pairing’. Also, studies in phonology such as Newman (1989), Mohammed (1996, 2012) and syntax (Newman, 1968, 1988) e.t.c abound. However, it is obvious that quite a lot has been written about ideophones in some language groups, but not much has been written about this in some other language groups to which Etulo belongs. It is against this backdrop that this paper attempts to give a preliminary analysis of the features of ideophones with data from Etulo, an endangered language of the Idomoid group of the West Benue Congo branch of Niger Congo family, in order to ascertain its distributional functions and to see if the features identified can be confirmed in the language. The analysis presented here is based on the properties of ideophones as identified in Doke’s (1935) and Cole’s (1955) definitions. All tones are marked and phonemic symbols are used as the Etulo orthography is still in progress. The rest of this section will give an overview of ideophone. While section 2 looks at the phonological and morphological properties with regard to syllable structure and reduplication, section 3 discusses ideophones in Etulo with focus on the semantic and syntactic properties. Section 4 forms the summary and conclusion.

#### 1.1 Ideophone – an overview

Ideophone is a category with distinct class of words. It performs varied functions as identified in Doke (1935:118) definition as:

a vivid representation of an idea in sound. A word often onomatopoeic which describes a predicate, qualificative or adverb in respect of manner, color, sound, smell, action, state or intensity.

In addition, Doke (1935:185) pointed out reduplication as one of the common feature of ideophones. Similarly, Cole (1955:370 cited in Newman, 1968) characterizes ideophones as “descriptive of sound, colour, smell, manner, appearance, state, action or intensity...[that is] vivid vocal images or representation of visual, auditory and other sensory or mental experiences”. According to Trask (1993:131-132) an ideophone is “one of a grammatically distinct class of words, occurring in certain languages, which typically express either distinctive sounds or visually distinctive types of action.” Crystal (1997:189) on the other hand, defines an ideophone as a “...term used in linguistics and phonetics for any vivid representation of an idea in sound, such as occurs through onomatopoeia.”

On the other hand, Welmers (1973) in Mohammed (2012) identifies vowel repetition, tonal peculiarity and reduplication as typical properties of ideophonic forms. For Mpande (1992:120) “an ideophone is an

independent entity that sustains a close relationship between meaning and sound (i.e., tone, vowel length, and other physical properties)”.

However, the distributional patterns of ideophones vary in languages. Maduka (1991) captures this phenomenon with regard to the Igbo language. According to him, Igbo ideophones can occur at the nominal position, adverbial position or pro-verbal positions. Newman (1968:116) lends support to this fact in answering the questions: ‘what is ideophone?’ and ‘how do they function?’ He argues that a definition of ‘ideophone’ should be a language independent phono-semantic characterization whereas a syntactic description of ideophones must be language specific. Similarly, with regard to word classes as Bodomo (2006:213) posits, “word classes may have the same taxonomy from language to language and [...] ideophones are existent in some languages but not in others. Also, the constellation of word class relationship differs cross linguistically”. This is to say that ideophones may share the same features across languages but these features function differently from language to language. We shall in the ensuing section look at syllable structure of Etulo ideophones.

## II. Syllable In Etulo

One of the features of Etulo ideophones is the syllable structure. Etulo is a no coda language. Hence, it is an open syllable language since consonants do not end a word. Ezenwafor (2009) identifies five basic syllable structures viz: V, N, CV, CVV (where VV can represent a long monophthong or diphthong) and CCV (where CC represents a consonant cluster). These syllable structures can be exemplified in the ideophonic words below:

1. CVCVCVCV
  - a. kwókwókwó ‘walking noisily’
  - b. gígígí ‘shivering profusely’
  - c. pàpàpà ‘flight of a bird’
2. CVVVV
  - d. tùùù ‘horrible smell’
  - e. bìùùù ‘extremely dark’

Observe that in the examples (1a-e), the possible forms of ideophone syllable are CVCVCV and CVVVV. They consist of two, three or four syllables. The vowel of the first syllable is consistently copied on the syllable following it. That is to say, Etulo ideophones are characterized by reduplications of one or two syllables, a series of identical vowels, and by tonal patterns consisting either of all high tones or of all low tones. The tonal quality which is consistently a low tone or high tone as in the two to three syllable word but low tone seems to be more prevalent. In the next section, we shall look at the reduplication of ideophones which involves coping of single or more syllables and/or morphemes.

### 2.1 Reduplication

Reduplication is a morphological process; a feature of Etulo ideophones, and indeed most African languages. Ayowale (1989:16) defines it as a morphological process whereby a copy of a morpheme (free or bound) in either slightly altered or identical form, is added to the stem in a syntagmatic relationship to produce a new word. Rubino (2005:11) cited in Uchechukwu (2007:25) describes reduplication as a “systematic repetition of phonological materials within a word for semantic or grammatical purposes”. This phenomenon has been evidenced in different languages. However, ideophone in Etulo follows two reduplicative patterns – full and partial reduplication. While full reduplication expresses a range of meanings such as quantity (i.e. plurality, distribution, intensity and emphasis), partial reduplication connotes mainly emphasis and intensity (Ayowale, 1984, 1988). Muhammed (2012:590) also notes that Hausa ideophones demonstrate a reduplicate and triplicate morphological structure. Similarly, Etulo ideophones whether partial or full can undergo multiple reduplications. The more an ideophone is reduplicated, the higher the degree of intensity and emphasis it conveys. Instances of reduplication are as follows:

#### (i). Full reduplication

- (3).a dómó slow  
dómó-dómó-dómó ‘continuously slow’
- b. lèbè sluggish  
lèbè-lèbè-lèbè ‘continuously sluggish’
- c. ná walking arrogantly  
ná-ná-ná ‘walking arrogantly continuously’
- d. pià sweet  
pià-pià-pià ‘extremely sweet’

**(ii). Partial reduplication**

- (4). a. plédédédé ‘whitish’  
b. fiaa ‘of a sudden lightning’

The reduplication of these ideophones can be indefinite and depicts continuity of the action that the ideophones denote. Ideophones in Etulo appeal to taste, smell, color, e.t.c. this will form our next section.

**III. Semantic Properties**

Semantically, Etulo ideophones provide a lively means of expressing perception of a state or event. The examples (5 & 6) suggest the speaker’s perception of an action

- (5). kpùùùù ‘of a sound/explosion/bang’  
(6). áni fò èlá òdàkàà gbè lá kpùùùù  
1SG hear voice gun sounding IDPH  
‘I hear the gun sound explosively’

Also, there are ideophones that appeal to taste, smell and color as exemplified in (7a-g) and in the sentences (8-10);

- (7). a. nónònónò ‘sour taste’  
b. pià-pià-pià ‘sugary taste’  
c. tùùùù ‘horrible/terrible smell’  
d. gbúmgbē ‘pleasant smell’  
e. bíùùù ‘extremely black’  
f. plédédédé ‘whitish’  
g. jònjònjòn ‘reddish’

Ideophone of taste

- (8). èniádē né li piàpiàpià  
palmwine this is IDPH  
‘This palmwine is too sugary’

Ideophone of smell

- (9). òzúù né li kwò tùùùù  
house this is smell IDPH  
‘This house has a stench odour’

Ideophone of colour

- (10). ñgisè náà túnzè plédédédé  
person that white IDPH  
‘That person is very fair’

In addition, Etulo ideophones also perform different syntactic functions such as modifying verbs and adjectives. That is to say they occur after an adjective or verb they modify.

- (11). ò lè kyíké kwákwákwá  
3SG is walk/go IDPH  
‘she/he is walking sluggishly’

- (12). ò lè ʃáaʃá gbùgbùgbùgbù  
3SG is shaking IDPH  
‘He/she is shivering vigorously’

- (13). imbè né li gádàgádà  
place this is IDPH  
‘This place is rowdy’

- (14). iʃè né li jògòjògò  
chair this is IDPH  
‘This chair is shaking’

- (15). ò lé mbímbí bíùùù  
3SG is dark IDPH  
‘He/she is very dark’

- (16). ñgisè náà túnzè plédédédé  
person that white IDPH  
‘That person is very fair’

- (17). òzùù né li kwò tùùùù  
house this is smell IDPH  
'This house has a stench odour'

The ideophones in examples (11-14) function as adverb of manner, state and action respectively while those in examples (15-17) act as ideophonic-intensifiers; that is to say they emphasize the adjective they modify.

#### IV. Conclusion

This study has shown that Etulo ideophones adhere to the syllable structure i.e., it forms the CV and CVV structure. Semantically, Etulo ideophones provide a lively means of expressing one's emotions, or perception of a state or event, just as they also appeal to taste, smell and color. Morphologically, just like in other languages, Etulo ideophones have high incidence of reduplication and triplication. The nature of repetition is indefinite such that the higher the number of duplication, the higher the degree of intensity or emphasis. Finally, with regard to syntactic properties, it functions as verb or adjective modifiers and intensifiers. This study is not an exhaustive study and therefore calls for further researches on Etulo ideophones in order to reveal more functions especially with regard to the location of Etulo ideophones within the spectrum of ideophones from a cross-linguistic perspective.

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