The Role of Ideophones: Phonological and Morphological Characteristics in Literature

Cristina Bahón Arnaiz

Abstract—Many Asian languages, such as Korean and Japanese, are well-known for their wide use of sound symbolic words or ideophones. This is a very particular characteristic which enriches its lexicon hugely. Ideophones are a class of sound symbolic words that utilize sound symbolism to express aspects, states, emotions, or conditions that can be experienced through the senses, such as shape, color, smell, action or movement. Ideophones have very particular characteristics in terms of sound symbolism and morphology, which distinguish them from other words. The phonological characteristics of ideophones are vowel ablaut or vowel gradation and consonant mutation. In the case of Korean, there are light vowels and dark vowels. Depending on the type of vowel that is used, the meaning will slightly change. Consonant mutation, also known as consonant ablaut, contributes to the level of intensity, emphasis, and volume of an expression. In addition to these phonological characteristics, there is one main morphological singularity, which is reduplication and it carries the meaning of continuity, repetition, intensity, emphasis, and plurality. All these characteristics play an important role in both linguistics and literature as they enhance the meaning of what is trying to be expressed with incredible semantic detail, expressiveness, and rhythm. The following study will analyze the ideophones used in a single paragraph of a Korean novel, which add incredible yet subtle expression. In addition to these phonological characteristics, there is a one main morphological singularity, which is reduplication and it carries the meaning of continuity, repetition, intensity, emphasis, and plurality.

Keywords—Ideophones, mimetic words, phonomimes, psychomimes, sound symbolism.

I. INTRODUCTION

Ideophones are a vivid representation of an idea and sensation in sound. It is a word, often onomatopoeic, which describes a predicate, qualitative or adverb in respect to manner, color, sound, smell, action, state or intensity.

Ideophones are also considered as marked words that depict sensory imagery [1]. When defining these words, keywords such as: depict, describe, represent, sensory imagery, expressivity or mimesis are crucial. For example, the ideophone mallang-mallang (말랑말랑) in Korean describes the sensation a person receives when touching something which is very soft and tender. This word produces the same sensation in sound. It is a word, often onomatopoeic, which depicts sensory imagery.

II. CATEGORIES

Ideophones in both Korean and Japanese are divided into three categories: phonomimes, phenomimes and psychomimes.

A. Phonomimes

These words are commonly known as onomatopoeia, which is expressed as giseigo in Japanese and niseongeo in Korean. Phonomimes mimic sounds, such as the sound of heavy rain or a dog’s bark.

B. Phenomimes

Phenomimes, known as gitaigo in Japanese or eitaeo in Korean, are words that describe conditions, movements, states or forms. Therefore, they express ideas or impressions from senses that are not related to the sense of hearing: sight, smell, taste or touch.

C. Psychomimes

Psychomimes, known as gijōgo in Japanese, depict psychological states, feelings or emotions. There is not a specific term in Korean for this category, although it is as rich in psychomimes as Japanese [2], [7].

III. PHONOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS

The Korean language has a well-defined system of vowel harmony in which vowels are traditionally grouped into three categories: light, dark and neutral vowels [3], [4].

### TABLE I

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vowel Category</th>
<th>Korean Vowels</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Light vowels</td>
<td>ㅏ (a), ㅗ (o), ㅜ (u), ㅐ (ae), ㅔ (e), ㅚ (oe), ㅟ (wae)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dark vowels</td>
<td>ㅏ (a), ㅗ (o), ㅜ (u), ㅔ (e), ㅐ (ae), ㅚ (oe), ㅟ (wae)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>ㅏ (a)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Light vowels express brightness, lightness, sharpness, thinness, and smallness, while dark vowels give opposite...
feels, such as darkness, heaviness, dullness, thickness, quickness or bigness. [5]

According to vowel harmony, dark vowels can never be used together with light vowels, and vice versa.

A. Vowel Ablaut

Vowel ablaut, also known as vowel gradation, is one of the most common characteristics of ideophones in terms of sound symbolism. It consists of a systematic variation of vowels in order to slightly change the meaning of that word. For example, the ideophone banjjak (밟밟), which is formed by light vowels, suggests something small and light that shines; while the ideophone beonjjeok (뽕뽕), where the light vowels have been changed into dark ones, depicts something big and heavy that shines.

![Image](a) ![Image](b)

Fig. 2 Visual explanation of the difference between banjjak (밟밟) (a) and beonjjeok (뽕뽕) (b)

An additional example that proves the difference of meaning when using light vowels versus dark vowels is the ideophone morak-morak (모락모락) -formed by light vowels and mureok-mureok (무렉무력) -composed of dark vowels. While the first one illustrates the way a small amount of smoke rises up quickly in the air, the second one describes the way a large amount of smoke rises up continuously, as is the case of smoke produced and emitted by big factories. Furthermore, the ideophone tong-tong (통통), which is composed by light vowels, describes a person who is plump or chubby in a positive way. However, on the contrary, the ideophone tung-tung (퉁퉁), where the dark vowels have been changed into dark ones, depicts something heavy and takes great weight.

![Image](a) ![Image](b)

Fig. 3 Visual explanation of the difference between morak-morak (모락모락) (a) and mureok-mureok (무력무력) (b)

B. Consonant Mutation

Consonant mutation, also known as consonant ablaut, changes gradually the meaning in terms of intensity. Korean has a three-step shift from the lenis or simple consonant, to its fortis, or reinforced form, and to its aspirated form. We can distinguish these into simple, intensive, and paraintensive; with the subjective impression conveyed by such forms being progressively more emphatic. [4]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE II KOREAN CONSONANT MUTATION [9]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Simple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(g) (d) (b) (s) (j)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intensive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(kk) (tt) (pp) (ss) (jj)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraintensive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(k) (t) (p) - (ch)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An example is the ideophone kkam-kkam (깜깜), which is formed by the intensive consonant kk (ㄲ), and manifests a state of darkness. However, kam-kam (캄캄), which is composed by the paraintensive consonant k (ㅋ), depicts a state that is even darker than kkam-kkam (깜깜). Consequently, the ideophone kkam-kkam (깜깜) may be used in a context where it is dark, yet not excessively dark. For example, where kkam-kkam (깜깜) can be used to denote the luminosity of the sky from 7 pm to 11 pm, kam-kam (캄캄) is used to express the maximum degree of darkness, such as the darkness of a tunnel, or the intense blackness of a countryside from 11 pm until the sun rises. Moreover, the ideophone dan-dan (단단) refers to something hard and solid, while tan-tan (딴딴) emphasizes its hardness and solidity more. Ultimately, tan-tan (딴딴) would express the highest level of intensity. This change in meaning is due to the different connotation that the simple consonant d (ㄷ) has with respect to the intensive consonant tt (ㅌ), and the paraintensive consonant t (ㅌ). Therefore, when referring to the solidity of ice, the form dan-dan (단단) may be used since it has the most neutral meaning. On the other hand, when emphasizing the hardness of the muscles after exercising, tan-tan (딴딴) may be used. Finally, tan-tan (딴딴) would be used to express the highest degree of hardness and robustness, just as when it is said that someone’s body is as robust and strong as steel. The same happens when talking about the levels of overweight in a person. The ideophone tung-tung (퉁퉁), which is formed by the intensive consonant tt (ㅌ), refers to a person who is fat or overweight. However, the ideophone tung-tung (퉁퉁), which is composed by the paraintensive consonant t (ㅌ), emphasizes the maximum level of intensity. In the case of this example, not only the consonant mutation adds detail to what is expressed, but also the use of the dark vowel u (ㅜ) contributes on the negativity of its meaning. In this way, consonant mutation generates different levels of intensity, emphasis and volume of an expression. As it was presented in some examples, consonant mutation can be accompanied by vowel ablaut,
IV. MORPHOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS

Reduplication is the most important characteristic of ideophones in terms of morphology. Ideophones can be classified according to their form into simple form and reduplicated form. Full reduplication is the most common form, although partial reduplication also exists.

Reduplication carries the meaning of continuity, repetition, intensity, emphasis, and plurality. [6] For example, the ideophone ttuk (伭), which has several meanings, describes the way something, singular and not plural, falls down suddenly. The reduplicated form of ttuk (],$ttuk-ttuk (㯩㯩),$ emphasizes the way something, plural, falls down rapidly and with more intensity than ttuk (俶). In this case, reduplication suggests singularity and plurality, and emphasizes its semantic intensity.

Something similar happens with the ideophone banjjak (받짝), which refers to something small and light that shines. Banjjak (받짝) in its simple form would suggest something singular, such as a single star that shines while on the other hand, banjjak-banjjak (받짝받짝), illustrates small and light stars that shine, implying a meaning of plurality.

In the case of beonjjeok (뿐짝), its simple form would evoke singularity, while its reduplicated form, beonjjeok-beonjjeok (뿐짝뿐짝), would imply a meaning of plurality. Besides this, the reduplicated form also emphasizes the intensity and continuity with which it shines. In this way, reduplication plays an important role, carrying the meaning of continuity, repetition, intensity, emphasis, and plurality. Vowel ablaut, consonant mutation, and reduplication can be combined together in one single ideophone, adding incredible semantic detail. For example, when referring to the ideophone nalssin (널쉰), nalssin-nalssin (널쉰널쉰), neulssin (عزل쉰), and neulssin-neulssin (عزل쉰عزل쉰), all of them have different connotations. Nalssin (널쉰), formed by light vowels and in simple form, refers to a person who is thin or slim. Nalssin-nalssin (널쉰널쉰) emphasizes its skininess due to reduplication. On the other hand, neulssin (عزلSqlParameter), which is composed by dark vowels, illustrates a person who is, not only slim, but also tall. The reduplicated form neulssin-neulssin (عزل쉰عزل쉰) intensifies and emphasizes its meaning.

Contrary to Western languages, where ideophones are poorly used, in Asian languages, such as Korean or Japanese, ideophones are widely used in any register of the language: formal, informal, oral or written.

The following excerpt, taken from the famous Korean novel Please Look up after Mum by Kyung-Sook Shin, uses five ideophones in just one paragraph. This evidences the extensive use of ideophones in literature. After presenting it in English, each ideophone will be analyzed in order to understand the way it enhances and interacts with the text.

“Since you heard about mom’s disappearance, you haven’t been able to focus on a single thought, besieged by long-forgotten memories unexpectedly popping up. And the regret that always trailed each memory… You bend your legs and squat on the spot where mom might have done the same. A few days after you insisted on buying the plain dress, you arrived at this very station with mom. Holding your hand tightly, she strode through the sea of people in a way that would intimidate even the authoritative building looking on from above, and headed across the square to wait for Hyong-chol under the clock tower. How could someone like that be missing? As the headlights of the subway train enter the station, people rush forward, glancing at you sitting on the ground, perhaps irritated that you’re in the way.” [8]

“염마가 겉에 있을 때 까마득히 잔뜩 있던 얼굴들이 아무데서나 놀라운 톱 길에 쫓겨나오고, 동네 염마 소식을 들은 뒤 지금까지 어떤 생각에도 일본 이상 짐을 하지 못했다. 기역 끝에 어금없이 찾아드는 후회들, 염마는 어쩌면 염마가 뭐라고 있어일지도 모르고 자기 자리에 무릎을 꿇고 앉아있었다. 어쩌면 이 악수하는 미소 온피스를 고른 여칠 뒤에 네는 이 서울에서 도착했다. 네를 서울에
It is important to briefly understand the synopsis of the novel in order to recognize the function of the ideophones in this short text, as well as the way they interact with each other. This book talks about a tragic story: the unexpected disappearance of a mother. This old woman who travelled from her home in the Korean countryside to Seoul with her husband to celebrate their birthday with her now-grown children, got lost in the crowd of Seoul station when she tried to take the subway together with him. This happened during the rush hour, when the station was full of people. Her husband got into the subway, but when he looked behind him, he realized that she was not there. From this point, the family will mobilize to find their missing mother, and they blame each other, and themselves, as the long-forgotten memories start to pop up, all of them full of regret.

“Since you heard about mom’s disappearance, you haven’t been able to focus on a single thought, besieged by long-forgotten memories unexpectedly popping up. And the regret that always trailed each memory…”

Two ideophones appear very close to each other in the first sentence: kkamadeuki (까마득히) and bulssuk-bulssuk (불쑥불쑥). Gamadeuki (가마득히) refers to something far, distant and remote. However, in kkamadeuki (가마득히), the plain consonant g (ㄱ) has been replaced by the tense consonant kk (ㄲ) in order to emphasize the remote distance of these memories in her mind. These long-forgotten memories of her mum are just as distant as the end of a long dark tunnel.

The ideophone bulssuk-bulssuk (불쑥불쑥) comes immediately after kkamadeuki (가마득히) in the sentence. It describes the way something pops out repeatedly, just as fire sparks from a campfire pop out over and over, in an unexpected way, unable to restrain them. This intensity is achieved by the repetition of the ideophone bulssuk (불쑥) into bulssuk-bulssuk (불쑥불쑥). Both kkamadeuki (가마득히) and bulssuk-bulssuk (불쑥불쑥) contain, in this way, incredible semantic detail and yet accurate expressiveness.

“Holding your hand tightly, she strode through the sea of people in a way that would intimidate even the authoritative building looking on from above, and headed across the square to wait for Hyong-chol under the clock tower.”

The ideophone kkok (ㄲ), which means tightly, has an important role in this paragraph. Kkok (ㄲ) is formed by a light vowel, so it has a positive meaning. A mother can hold her child’s hand tightly because he did something bad, or in order to protect him from some kind of danger. In this sentence, kkok provides this second meaning. Additionally, this ideophone has a strong connection with the whole story: her husband released her hand, so she got lost and disappeared in the sea of people.

“How could someone like that be missing? As the headlights of the subway train enter the station, people rush forward, glancing at you sitting on the ground, perhaps irritated that you’re in the way.”

Two ideophones appear one more time next to each other. Geochijeok (거치적) means to stand in one’s way or block up someone’s way. Hillkeum (힐끔) refers to the action of glancing or taking a brief or hurried look. Nevertheless, in hillkeum (힐끔) the plain consonant g (ㄱ) has been replaced by the tense consonant kk (ㄲ), emphasizing the way and the intensity with which people glance at her. Both ideophones express a subjective sensation of an objective incident: she subjectively feels that she is blocking up other people’s way, and she subjectively thinks that people are glancing at her.

In this way, five ideophones appeared in just one paragraph, providing semantic detail and expressiveness. It is also interesting to realize how they interact with each other and with the whole text. However, it is difficult to realize the importance of ideophones just by reading the translated version. In order to accurately translate the meaning of an ideophone, it would be necessary to use at least two to three adjectives or adverbs. This would be impossible, however, as the text would lose its smoothness.

VI. CONCLUSION

Ideophones play an important role in both, linguistics and literature, as they enhance the meaning of what is trying to be expressed with incredible detail, expressiveness and rhythm. Vowel ablativ, consonant ablaut or reduplication are the main factors used to achieve this result.

REFERENCES

[9] Romanization was made according to the Revised Romanization of Korean system (RR), done by the South Korean Ministry of Culture.