

Chapter 5

The Closing Chapter

5.1 Conclusion

From the analysis of the corpus of data, I find two systems of tallied syllables in which a number of patterns that reveal vocalic iconicity are formed.

The first system is the Primary System which is identified by the structure of the tallied syllable as an open syllable. The other noted feature of this system is that it is absolutely productive.

There are two patterns of tallied syllable formation in the Primary System to form a lexical construction :

- (1) $CVCT + C_r V: \# CT(n/1)$
- (2) $CVCT + C_r V_1 V_2 \# LT(n/1)$

The iconic vowels of the Primary System consists of three members classified in two subsets. { /e:/, /a:/ } in one subset as an opposition pair showing the vowel ablauting phenomenon, and { /eɪ/ } as the unique vowel in the other set. The inherent values indicated by this set of iconic vowels are listed in Table 3.2.

All of the tallied syllables in the Secondary System are closed syllables. The consonant finals that convey subclassifying senses are { p, t, k, m, ŋ }, see Table 4.2. The iconic vowels in this system consist of /e:/ vs /a:/ and /ɯ/. {/a:/, /e:/} is classified as one set, owing to their special functioning as the ablaut pair and {/ɯ/} the unique vowel as the other set.

Another feature of the Secondary System is that part of these tallied syllables are collocated with headwords that have no phonological links, therefore it can be said that this system is productive only to a relative degree.

In the Secondary System, Set 1 of { /e:/, /a:/ } can occur in both types of tallied syllables, whereas Set 2 of {/ɯ/} is basically restricted to occurrence in Type I, pattern (i). But it may be noted that /ɯ/ occur once in the example of "khe:u 325 ʃmt 55" which shows no phonological link with the headword and has to be accordingly placed in Type II. This problem may be reserved for future study.

Type I has 2 patterns of tallied syllables which differ in tone categories, and criterion is based upon syllable structure whether it is CVN or CVS. The two patterns can be represented by the formulas:

$$(i) \quad CVCT + C_r \quad V_l \quad C_s \quad LT(n/1)$$

(ii) CVC T + C_r Vi C_N CT(h/l)

Type II has only one pattern:

CVCT + C_ø Vi C_r LT)

The two patterns of Type I proves stronger relations of phonological constraints with the headwords, whereas the tallied syllables in Type II can easily be mistaken for independent lexical units. The justification for including these syllables as tallied syllables in Type II is decided by the ablauting set of vowels {/a:/, /e:/}.

The tallied syllables of the two systems are not fully displayed in any published lexicon of the dialect, since the iconicity system works through productive principles and collocation.

5.2 Discussion

There are three sub-topics in this section.

5.2.1 Phonetic Features of the Iconic Vowels

The iconic vowels /a:/ and /e:/ of the Deba dialect indicate oppositions of augmentative vs diminutive which coincide with the general phenomenon in other languages that the degree of vowel height is used to indicate a con-

trast in size. In this case, /e/ and /a/ can be seen as supporting conventional claims of linguists such as Otto Jespersen (1922:515), Gerárd Diffloth (1976:258), and Kenneth Gregerson (1983:217)¹.

These two vowels are found to be [-low, -back] and [+low, +back] respectively. These distinctive features correspond to the size of the cavity formed by the articulatory conditions proved to be related to contrastive meanings in other literature².

The other two vowels /e^h/ and /a^h/ are not so clearly related to the vocal tract formed in the mouth. But in a way, the two elements can operate in a systematic way by their distinctive features of being [-high, +tense] and [+high, -tense] respectively.

The Chomsky-Halle feature system is used herein to specify the four iconic vowels in the two iconicity systems

¹ Otto Jespersen wrote in the article Symbolic Value of the Vowel [i]: "In this paper I shall attempt to show that the vowel [i], high-front-unround, especially in its narrow or thin form, serves very often to indicate what is small, slight, insignificant, or weak." Obviously he has related the articulatory features with the meaning of the vowel [i]. Kenneth Gregerson discussed more of cases of this kind, see Gregerson (1983:217).

² Ultan (1971:545) concluded that the high front vowel is a possible constant corresponding to diminutive semantic categories, after his statistical result of comparing data of over 130 languages.



discussed in chapter 3 and chapter 4³, to prove that their phonetic features can apply to both systems of phonetic symbolism and phonological symbolism. (cf. 2.3.1 & 2.3.2)

The plus and minus signs are used in the matrix to symbolize the membership or non-membership of a certain feature and a 0 indicates that no information is needed for distinctive purpose.

| vowels | e | a | eɪ | ɪ |
|-----------|---|---|----|---|
| high | - | - | - | + |
| low | - | + | 0 | 0 |
| back | - | + | + | + |
| tenseness | 0 | 0 | + | - |

5.2.2 Gaps and Potentiality

Most of the time gaps of non-occurrence are usually considered idiosyncrasies. But it may not be so simple provided that a view of broader perspective is being made.

Cases of opposition pairs such as /e:/ vs /a:/ enable us to understand and predict the gaps in the iconicity system. Therefore in those cases of only a single occurrences of either /e:/ or /a:/, the potentiality of the

³ Ladefoged (1975:243) introduced a set of binary features proposed by Chomsky and Halle to specify a phonological system in terms of the place of articulation.

realisation of becoming a pair is within expectation. I have at times tested a few cases with the informant, such as by saying the non-occurring part of a pair, and he would react with hesitation to confirm a real gap, but only by saying that he does not use it himself, but it may be possible that some of his relatives would use it.

In another respect, the case of a gap may point to something else. For example, each of the following lexical constructions lacks an opposition part:

For example:

- | | | | |
|-----|----------|-----------|--------------------------------------|
| (a) | ?wa:ŋ 33 | ?w a: 325 | to roam faraway |
| (b) | ?we:ŋ 33 | ?w e: 325 | to loiter within a close distance |

There is no * /?wa:ŋ 33 ?w e: 325 / for (a) and no * /?we:ŋ 33 ?w e: 325 / for (b). But if we look at the opposition found in the vowel gradation of the headwords, the non-occurrence of a potential formation is explicable. The semantic contrast existing in the semantic features of the two lexical words [?wa:ŋ 33] meaning 'to roam' and [?we:ŋ] meaning 'to loiter' already reveal an opposition of augmentative vs diminutive scope of the action. Therefore I would expect that the chance of the occurrence of the other part of a pair may not be necessary.

5.2.3 Some residual problems

There are some residual parts of the data that reveal plausible phases of the iconicity system in the Debao dialect to be explored, whenever the chance is favourable to the study in the future.

(a) Other iconic vowels

There are other vowels in the Debao system which are also involved in the iconic system, but mostly in the other categories of post-positional syllables functioning as expressives which are obligatorily disyllabic, i.e. these syllables can only be used in the reduplicative model.

Examples are given as follows:

lan 52 kau 52 phja:i 325 te:k 33 te:k 33.
nephew my walk in a toddling way.

Te 52 ma: 31 ʔe:ŋ 55 ʔe:ŋ 55.
He come jogging in.

This kind of expressives may be called tallied syllables in a maximized version of my definition. They are different from the others in that the reduplicatives are collocated to a closed set of headwords.

The expressives impose an idea in a way that excites the senses, emotion and imagination of the hearer. Actually those tallied syllables that can be reduplicated in the Type II category of the Secondary System reveals overlapping domain with this kind of expressive mentioned above. For example:

pei 31 lo:t 55 lot 55
 plump, lovely

pei 31 lu: 325 lu: 325
 fat as of a pig

dam 31 sum 33 sum 33
 black and wet, pejorative feeling

tuŋ 33 ʔi:k 55 ʔi:k 55
 twinkling lights at a distance

(b) Other Systematic Sets

Two sporadic sets of various gradations of vowel ablaut are found.

(i) A special case of vowel ablaut

taŋ 325 pointing upward, erecting

taŋ 325 ŋut 55 ŋut 55
big object as of a dog's tail

taŋ 325 ŋ i:t 55 ŋi:t 55
small object as of the tail of a dragonfly

taŋ 325 ŋ e:t 55 ŋe:t 55
as of a puppy's tail

(ii) Another case of vowel ablaut

he:n 325 *yellow colored*

he:n 325 ʔm: 325 ʔm: 325
burnt hue of yellow, unpleasant

he:n 325 ʔa: 325 ʔa: 325
turned yellow as of withered leaves

he:n 325 ʔi: 325 ʔi: 325
yellowish as of grains ready for harvest

The cases of this kind of vowel gradation are quite limited in the lexicon, perhaps because of my concentration upon collecting the data of the opposition pairs, or the possibility that it is a rather recently innovated process.

Therefore they are not included in my scope of study. Elicitation of advanced data should be collected if this topic is to be studied further.

(c) Special Reduplicatives

There is a large group of post-positional syllables that should arouse interest in future study. The lexical construction is made up of two syllables that engage in special reduplication, and the whole construction is used as a phrase.

| | | |
|---------|---------|--------------|
| tsak 55 | tsik 55 | a little bit |
| ʃo:k 33 | ʃe:k 33 | struggling |
| jup 33 | je:p 33 | twinkling |
| pe:t 55 | le:t 55 | flat |
| mok 33 | tok 33 | rude |

These couplets can be compared to the category of Special Reduplicatives in the Siamese language.⁴

Anyway, in the present stage of analysis, we are confronted with many idiosyncracies of the iconicity system that are reserved for future explanation due to the lack of data.

⁴ S. Laksaneeyanawin (1986:54) discussed and explored similar couplet forms in her article titled Some Semantic Functions of Reduplicatives in Thai.

5.3 Supporting Evidence

A report on the principle of iconicity in vocalic oppositions and symbolism can be found in another published article titled "Reduplicatives in the Debao Dialect of Zhuang Language"³ written by Meng Wen Bui.

A set of examples is quoted from his article and is listed here in this chapter as a supporting case of the iconicity systems discussed in this thesis.

Meng speaks a municipal dialect in Debao County. The dialect of Lung-Guang village in my study is a variation of Meng's dialect. There is a variation of the phonetic realization of vowels and the tone values⁴. According to his analysis, there are 6 tonemes, the numbers :

| T1 | T2 | T3 | T4 | T5 | T6 |
|----|----|----|-----|------|-------|
| ˥ | ˨ | ˨˨ | ˨˨˨ | ˨˨˨˨ | ˨˨˨˨˨ |

In order to avoid confusion, I prefer to quote directly the alphabet and tone numbers from his original article⁷.

³See Zhuang: The Thai People in the People's Republic of China, vol.1, edited by Pranee Kullavanijaya, 1986.

⁴see Meng Wen Bui (1986:57). The vowel phonemes in his dialect are listed in the system { i, e, a, a:, ə, u, o, ɔ }.

(a) vowel ablaut in his data

The related data in Mr. Meng's article on vowel ablaut symbolism are listed as follows:

<:) corresponding to the vowel ablaut in my Primary System, see section 3.4.1.

| | | |
|-------|------|-------------------------------|
| lɔj 1 | le 1 | to stream down (small creek) |
| | la 1 | to stream down (bigger creek) |

<:) corresponding to the vowel ablaut in the Secondary System, see section 4.5.2.

| | | |
|-------|-------|--|
| pok 4 | pek 4 | to peel casually |
| | pak 4 | to peel with bigger action, showing unwillingness |

| | | |
|-------|-------|-----------------------------|
| pon 5 | pen 5 | to feed someone with ease |
| | pan 5 | to feed someone unwillingly |

| | | |
|-------|-------|---|
| fut 2 | fet 2 | water splashing out in a small amount |
| | fat 2 | water splashing out in a bigger amount |

lut 4 let 4 get loose (smaller size)

lat 4 get loose (bigger size)

lɔn 4 len 4 fall off (smaller size)

lan 4 fall off (bigger size)

(b) Meng's data revealing the single occurrence
the iconic vowels

Examples of the single occurrence of /e/ in Meng's data. His examples correspond to my data in the Primary System, see section 3.4.2 (a) :

loŋ 2 le 2 to wrap over

won 6 we 6 to hit

pan 5 pe 5 to mold

tɔm 3 te 3 to tread

baw 4 be 4 to exhale

(c) the iconic vowel /əj/ corresponds to the /em/ in my data, adding in an attitude of casualness, or referring to an unspecific object (cf. 3.4.2) :

taŋ 4 tɔj4 stool

pan 5 pɔj4 to mold

pat 4 pɔj4 to blow (wind)

My purpose is to show that similar phenomena of iconicity have also been reported in a variation of the Debao dialect. Thus one can be better informed and perceive confirmation of the iconicity system as claimed.

5.4 Remarks

The patterns that are revealed in iconicity is only a kind of structural formalism. The interweaving iconic entities that make up the patterns can be of different materials and characteristics, such as the vowel ablaut, the consonant finals, the pitches and other reduplication processes etc. The psychological reality and motivation underlying the structural patterns are usually too evasive to be detected and reported in writings.

The different forms of iconicity in a certain language should be thoroughly studied, and then the whole picture of the iconicity in that particular system can then be evaluate correctly. One should approach such a study



with more understanding of the iconicity phenomenon as a mechanism that works upon the law of nature and that can change, vanish and be reborn.

Most of the meanings of these iconic constructions are actually undefined and general. When viewed from another aspect, they may be interpreted as extremely detailed and idiosyncratic. In a community that has developed more technical and specified terms, the expressive usage of language will be diminished in many situations. On the other hand, the richness of such kind of usage will be found in an intimate, emotional and imagination appealing environment.

The headwords of the lexical construction are limited to three syntactic categories: the verb, the noun, and the adjective. By general observation, the headwords in the Primary System are mostly verbs. The formation of the lexical construction will change the process of a verb into a state, and the construction will be used as an independent phrase in a sentence.