Iconicity, ideophones and mimesis

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Speakers in spontaneous interactions often switch into what has been termed the "mimetic mode" (Güldemann 2008: 289) or "demonstration" (Clark & Gerrig 1990), as illustrated by *wham, bam* in (1) (rather than the descriptive *I crashed into the door).* A correlate of the mimetic mode is "performative foregrounding" (Nuckolls 1992: 53), e.g. interruption of rhythmic flow, higher intensity, or a noticeable change in pitch. Alongside vocalizations, direct quotations and gestures, conventionalized expressions often labelled "ideophones", e.g. English *wham* (1) or Jaminjung *deb* (2), are often employed in the mimetic mode.

(1) *I came up, didn't see his door, went through the gap and .. wham, bam*.

(2) Jaminjung (Mirndi, Australia) (own fieldwork)
    Deb .   *gurunyung=gi*   *gani-ma=nu*.
    knock   head=LOC   3SG>3SG-hit.PST=3SG.OBL
    '(Her husband ran after the goanna and) WHACK! hit it on the head.'

This paper builds on research on the mimetic mode and on the prototype approach to the typology of parts of speech (Hengeveld 1992; Croft 2000), in arguing that mimesis should be recognized as a major function of language, on a par with reference, predication and attribution. Ideophones can be defined as lexemes which, without further measures being taken, serve the function of mimesis. Distributionally, this means that they can appear in syntactic isolation as in (2), but also in specialized mimetic constructions marked e.g. by prosody or quotative markers. It is also in line with the prototype approach that ideophones can be employed in other, non-mimetic functions in many languages, e.g. as predicates with a light verb (Amha 2001; Franco 2017); this multifunctionality has been described as a trade-off between expressiveness and syntactic integration (Dingemanse & Akita 2016). These findings not only underline the linguistic relevance of the mimetic mode but also its close integration with the descriptive mode in language use.

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