

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

#### 2.1 Iconicity

Iconicity in languages has been studied sporadically since the early twenties, but a model has yet been formed, thus leaving the field opened to non-uniformity of special terms and categories, dazzling a new-comer to great excitement and difficulties.

Before iconicity can be studied, the concept of an icon has to be defined first.

##### 2.1.1 Symbol and Icon

By general understanding of most linguists and common people, the relationship between form and meaning is basically arbitrary. Saussure's lines on this subject have frequently been quoted.<sup>1</sup> In Saussure's (1959:67) term, it is the 'SIGNIFIER' which is studied as a linguistic sign, and which bears an arbitrary relationship to the 'SIGNIFIED.

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<sup>1</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure wrote in his Course in general linguistics, "...the bond between the signified (signifié) and the signifier (signifiant) is arbitrary...the linguistic sign is arbitrary." (1959: 106).

The arbitrary sign used in the "naming" of things is called symbol and the non-arbitrary sign icon.

Symbol is more widely used referring to linguistic sign as Ogden and Richards (1923) defines it as "those signs which men use to communicate one with another"<sup>2</sup>. Most of the linguists traditionally used to ignore the perspective of the non-arbitrary linguistic signs---the Icons. However, there are quite a number of studies contributed to the domain of iconicity in languages consistently throughout the years, for instances, C.S. Peirce, Roman Jakobson, Otto Jespersen, Dwight Bolinger and so on.

Peirce's definition has always been referred to whenever there is discussion of iconicity, just because he is one of the earliest to mention the term "icon" in his study of semiotics. C.S. Peirce (1939)\* defines the icon as such: "An icon is a sign which would lose the character which renders it significant,...A symbol is a sign which

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<sup>2</sup>quoted from Ullmann (1950, 1963 impression, p.27). Ullmann commented further: "In this terminology, 'sign' is a class-term, whereas 'symbol' denotes a species of that class: all signs employed in human communication."

\*I quoted Peirce's definition from Lyons (1977:102), because I can't obtain the book so often mentioned by many other authors --- C.S. Peirce. 1933. Collected papers, ed. by Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss:vol.4. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

would lose the character which renders it a sign if there were no interpretant."

Actually he has not aimed to define it clearly in terms of what the linguists are concerned with in dealing with real linguistic data. Thus whosoever wants to relate Peirce's definition to the facts revealed by typological language studies, will have to use very sophisticated wording and come to more confusion.

Wescott (1971) commented: "According to Pierce, an icon is a non-arbitrary intentional sign -- that is, a designation which bears an intrinsic resemblance to the thing that it designates". This is the best interpretation of icon in the linguistic sense. The first two key words underlined are referring to the cause of formation, whereas the last key word thumbnails the form itself. The focal point of relevance is the "resemblance" between the form and meaning.

If the name is phonetically motivated by the natural sounds of the objects, as in names of birds "Kookaburra, cuckoo" etc., the linguistic sign will be identified as an icon instead of a symbol, because it exhibits the relations and entities it signifies; it bears a direct resemblance to the signified object or concept.

These names of birds bear resemblance to the natural sounds produced by the referents or the birds, which in turns motivate transparent links between the linguistic signs and the referents. This is the simple class of iconicity which most people would call onomatopoeia.

But language is far more complicated than a group of sounds imitating nature. Obviously, the opacity in resemblance greatly outnumbers those sounds that are associated with transparent images, such as onomatopoeia.

Resemblance, thus, is the most obscure term in Wescott's definition. Whether the icon is to be connected with an image or with a diagram, there are very few substantial cases of resemblance either related to shape, sound or meaning in real language. Therefore holding onto the condition of resemblance will greatly limit those entries that are associated with iconicity in the lexicon. On the contrary, if one goes back and look for the cause between the form and the meaning, or in short, motivation, more examples can be found and thus deserve to be studied.

#### 2.1.2 Motivation.

The highlight of the concept in iconicity is the motivation between the linguistic sign and its meaning.

The case of onomatopoeia has revealed how a name is motivated by the sound imitation to form a link between the sign and the referent. Other linguistic signs are also found to have a link with its reference, which is the kind of motivation in our discussion.

Iconicity is a property<sup>3</sup> of a linguistic sign that reveals an inherent value and intrinsic link between the form and meaning. The linguistic form that reveals such a property is called an icon. Motivation then can be used as a criterion to discriminate a symbol from an icon.

## 2.2 The Systematic Feature of Iconicity

Iconicity is basically a systematic set of phonetic features that reveal the semantic characteristics in the phonological system of a particular language. In order to study iconicity in the systematic phonological level, the features of the phonetic level have to be firstly studied. Hence the phonetic symbolism and the phonological symbolism are separately discussed as follows<sup>4</sup> :

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<sup>3</sup>Lyons (1977:102) comments: "Furthermore, insofar as resemblance may be of many different kinds, in languages as in other semiotic systems, iconicity is at best a complex and heterogeneous property."

<sup>4</sup>Diffloth (1976:261) used 'phonological symbolism' and (ibid.262) 'acoustic symbolism'. Gregerson (1983:220) used 'oral cavity symbolism' to mean the phonetic symbolism in this thesis.

### 2.2.1 Phonetic symbolism

At the phonetic level, iconicity is found in various sound units, such as consonants, vowels and even the suprasegmental units. The supporting reasons for this kind of symbolism are based upon acoustic or articulatory reality. The earliest discussion on iconicity being linked to the articulatory features of the vowels can be found in Otto Jespersen (1922), Firth (1933), and Hass (1972) etc.

As early as 1922, Otto Jespersen (1922:515) acted as the vanguard to describe the vowel /i/ in English as "narrow or thin variety" and thus is appropriate to take the symbolic values of "what is small, weak, insignificant, or on the other hands, refined or dainty". He also explains (ibid. 516) that the reason why the sound [i] can be easily associated with small objects, and [u, o, a] with bigger things, he said: "...the perception of the small lip aperture in one case and the more open mouth in the other may have also its share in the rise of the idea." He also quoted Sir Paget's explanation on the related size of the mouth cavity.

Jespersen (ibid.516) also mentioned the possibility of the high and low pitch being used in some African languages to denote size variations.

### 2.2.2 Phonological symbolism



Phonological symbolism, such as vowel and consonant symbolism, tone symbolism etc. are reported in the data of different languages of Ultan (1970). Marked phonological features such as high front vowels, glottalized and nasalized consonants etc. can be associated with a number of size-related semantic categories in the iconicity system<sup>5</sup>.

It is not always possible to find evident sensation in the articulatory or acoustic reality of the iconic sound unit in question.

Theraphan Luangthongkum (1979:254)<sup>6</sup> posited : "Rounded and unrounded back vowels (u, o, ɯ, ɤ) always suggest a larger size or a higher degree of intensity whereas vowels belonging to the second class (i, e, ɛ) always suggest a smaller size or a lower degree of intensity. The vowels of the third class (ə, a) may convey either the idea of largeness or that of smallness." This case study of the Isarn dialect, a Northeastern dialect of Thai language not only shows that the phonetic features of the three class of vowels are distinctive but also that the three group of

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<sup>5</sup>Ultan used the term symbolism to mean iconicity, hence in his article, one can find those terms such as size-symbolism, vowel symbolism, diminutive symbolism, ablaut symbolism etc.

<sup>6</sup>T.Luangthongkum (1979) has made a study on "Iconicity of Vowel Qualities in Northeastern Thai Reduplicated Words", in Studies in Tai and Mon-Khmer Phonetics and Phonology.

vowels can operate on a systematic way.

To the extreme, in some cases such as the Khasi language as pointed out by Ultan (1970:546), there are examples that show "a complete reversal of size values for the mid vowels as opposed to the remaining vowels".

Furthermore as in the case of Rengao language (see K. Gregerson, 1983:220), the iconicity system in the pharynx cavity and in the oral cavity will be easily dismissed, if the study does not reveal the systematic way of the vowel types.

One can now conclude that phonological symbolism detects the iconic values of a language-specific set of systematic sound units whereas phonetic symbolism can include individual sound units that indicate iconicity under physiologically explainable circumstances.

With the more or less common physiological structure of human vocalic organs, it can be understood that those iconic sound units basing upon physiological sensation of the vocal cavity must be the medium leading to the generalisation of universality in sound-symbolism. But as seen in Ultan (ibid) 's article, the hypotheses of universality in a number of symbolism types have yet to be confirmed.



### 2.2.3 Universality of sound-symbolism

Sapir (1929) made an experiment on controlled groups, testing [i] and [a] for the psychological reality of size-sound symbolism. The participants were asked to mark out a given meaning in accordance with the underlying sense of largeness as opposed smallness etc. of an imaginary word in which was embedded with each of the vowels mentioned. "The effective score was in favor of [a] as the vowel inherently symbolizing a large but rather than a small reference was 22/27 or 81 per cent. In the second set of thirty word pairs illustrating the same vocalic contrast, 21 of the words involving the vowel [a] were said to connote the large reference, 5 with the vowel [i] connoted the small reference."<sup>7</sup>

The experiment was the first of its kind to provide data from psycho-physiological evidence to support the hypothesis of the universal in size-sound symbolism. In this case, he is testing phonetic symbolism on a universal and non-language specific basis. The intention of promoting the studies of sound-symbolism under scientific conditions is respectable, but the nature of the explanation thus

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<sup>7</sup>quoted from Selected Writings of Edward Sapir (1949:63).

obtained is questionable.

Therefore before the hasty conclusion to universality in sound symbolism, studies in specific languages involving the bifurcation of phonetic symbolism and phonological symbolism must be more substantiable.

### 2.3 The Tallied Syllables

My purpose in giving a class of syllables in the Debao dialect a new nomenclature stems from the fact that the other existent names, such as expressives, phonesthemes, ideophones etc. in English documents, are all related to shades of meanings as associated with language-specific characteristics\*. In order to avoid mistaken expectations in association with former usage of the terms, I prefer to use a new and specific term to refer to my scope of study.

When considering a special language group such as the Debao dialect and dealing with a new dimension of icon-

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\*I consider the term expressive to be a generic name for all kinds of element units in languages that reveal iconicity. But even with expressives, Diffloth (1972) equated these with ideophones in his discussion of the Semai language. What Bolinger (1976) referred to as phonesthemes in English words is not the same type of phonaesthetic words used by Henderson (1965). There are many more terms that have been used with sound symbolism studies, but so far there is no general term that can capture all the specific features in all languages.

icity revealed in the monosyllabic word part of a lexical construction, I also find that no such special term in English can cover all the features of those post-positional syllables in the scope of my study.

I have proposed the new term, tallied syllables, to name this group of special syllables in the dialect, based upon the meaning of the term "tallies" as interpreted by Haiman and Cruse.

John Haiman (1985:9) said that the **tally system** is most iconic and the tally representation, such as the Roman numeral III, is also an icon. In this example, he is explaining "the forms as images".

D. A. Cruse (1986:33) uses the term **semantic tallies**, to mean elements in a lexical unit that itself cannot carry any meaning of its own, and must combine with another headword<sup>7</sup>. Here the head is also used in the sense of the semantic head in that it is part of the whole lexical construction upon which the tallies have to depend.

If there is any connection between Cruse's semantic

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<sup>7</sup>D.A. Cruse (1986:47) said: "The element in a construction which interacts directly with an element or elements outside the construction may be called the semantic head of the construction."

tallies and Haiman's idea concerning the tally system it may be found in what Cruse has said about the semantic tallies as equivalents to numbered or lettered labels that distinguish one kind of things from the others. The semantic tallies are simulated to numbers and labels as notations in a tally system. Though Cruse does not seem to identify his semantic tallies with the concept of an icon, he nevertheless suggests in his endnote 2.4, No.10 that they can in some sense carry a semantic trait.

Therefore the new term, tallied syllables, is coined after the original suggestions of Haiman and Cruse. That Haiman referring to the tally system as an iconic system, and Cruse suggesting the semantic tallies as non-lexical unit, happen to cover the most important features of those syllables to be studied in this thesis.

The definition of a tallied syllable can be stated as such : "A tallied syllable is monosyllabic and is bound to a headword to form a lexical construction. The phonological segments of the tallied syllables are iconic and the semantic functions of these syllables are to supplement the construction with some additional overtones."

### 2.3.1 The Criteria of a Tallied Syllable

The criteria to define the tallied syllables are based upon the following conditions:

a. The tallied syllables is only a dependent word part in a lexical construction; it is not a full lexical unit.

b. The tallied syllable is bound to the headword of the lexical construction. In structure it is monosyllabic\* .

c. The vowel in a tallied syllable is iconic and indicate inherent semantic values. The set of vowels to be studied hereafter includes { /a:/, /e:/, /em/, /m/ }.

### 2.4 Review on Zhuang Post-Positional Syllables

The other reason for my suggesting a new nomenclature is that those tallied syllables defined in this thesis are only a part of what Prof. Liang Min and other Zhuang linguists call by the name of post-positional syllables.

The syllables that they have studied are listed at

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\*There are a subset of these syllables that can function in a disyllabic model, but which are excluded from the scope of this study.

times as (1) suffix elements (2) post-positional complementary elements (3) post-positional syllables, and (4) sound-form imitatives. Their greatest argument is whether the post-positional syllables should be considered as independent lexical entries or just a constituent units of a lexical construction.

Some of the former studies contributed by the Chinese Zhuang scholars are introduced herewith as a reference listing:

(1) In Zhuang Yu Gou Ci Fa Gai Yao (1959), as quoted by Liang Min, is reported to have included all those post-positional syllables, together with the solid lexical adverbs, in one category, and named it post-positional complementary elements.

(2) Zhuang Yu Wu-Ming Yu Fa (1959) conforms with the idea that since those syllables are post-positional syllables and dependent upon a headword, they should be considered as suffixes.

(3) Zhuang Yu Jian Zhi (1979) (1979) named part of the syllables mentioned above as post-positional syllables.

(4) Qin Guosheng (1979), the co-editor of Zhuang

Yu Jian Zhi, elaborated his idea on these syllables in an article titled: "The Post-positional Syllables of the Verbs and Adjectives in Liu-Jiang". His data are based upon his own home dialect, the Liu-Jiang dialect.

He is one of the first few Zhuang linguists who have contributed to a systematic study of these syllables, but his attention was directed then more to the patterns of the reduplicative construction, and have ignored significant categorization.

(5) Liang Min (197?), a well-known Zhuang linguist, has also written an article to tackle the problems connected with these syllable in "A Study of the Post-Positional Syllables in Adjectives, Nouns and Verbs of the Zhuang Language". His data are also based on his own home dialect, the Xia-Ling dialect.

He proposed that the syllables should be classified into various types according to their semantic functions.

(6) An article titled "Reduplicatives in Debao Dialect" by Meng Wanbiu (1989), published in the Thai language<sup>3</sup>, obviously provides an alternative treatment of the tallied syllables, in which he tries to analyse the data

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<sup>3</sup>The article is found in Zhuang -- The Thai People in the People's Republic of China, vol.1. ed. by Pranee Kullavanijaya et al., published by the Chulalongkorn University Press: Bangkok, 1986.

from the perspective of the process of reduplication rather than focusing upon the semantic functions of vocalic icons.

The data that he used are based upon his own home dialect, which is a variation of the Debao dialect under my study. I quote some of his data in Chapter 5 to support my hypothesis.

The most important conclusion from reviewing the articles mentioned above is that the range of the syllables in former studies has been too wide and non-systematic. A new classification of the syllables into separate categories is essential so that the intrinsic characteristics of these syllables can be evaluated.

## 2.5 Technical Terms Used in this Thesis

1. Tallied Syllable: it is an iconic non-lexical syllable which is placed after a headword to form one lexical construction.
2. Lexical Construction: it is an overall process of internal organisation of a grammatical unit of the lexical level which is made up of one headword and one tallied syllable.





3. Inherent Iconic Values: these are the semantic values attached to a fixed iconic vowel as an integrated part of the segment (see Tables 3.3 and 4.2).
  
4. Vowel Ablaut: this is a system of vowel alternations such that the opposing features of the vowels are equated with size-related contrastiveness (see section 3.4.1).
  
5. Tonal Configuration: it reveals a reactive system of combining arrangements between the pitch types and the tone shape categories (see section 3.3.3).