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Proceedings of Conference on  
**Language Documentation & Linguistic Theory 2**

Edited by Peter K. Austin, Oliver Bond, Monik Charette,  
David Nathan & Peter Sells

13-14 November 2009 School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London

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ISBN: 978-0-7286-0392-9

This publication can be cited as:

Mark Dingemanse. 2009. Ideophones in unexpected places. In Peter K. Austin, Oliver Bond, Monik Charette, David Nathan & Peter Sells (eds) *Proceedings of Conference on Language Documentation and Linguistic Theory 2*. London: SOAS.

or:

Mark Dingemanse. 2009. Ideophones in unexpected places. In Peter K. Austin, Oliver Bond, Monik Charette, David Nathan & Peter Sells (eds) *Proceedings of Conference on Language Documentation and Linguistic Theory 2*. London: SOAS. [www.hrelp.org/eprints/ldlt2\\_09.pdf](http://www.hrelp.org/eprints/ldlt2_09.pdf)

# Ideophones in unexpected places

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## 1. INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

Drawing from a varied corpus spanning several hours and many types of discourse, this paper presents novel facts about ideophone usage in Siwu, a Kwa language from eastern Ghana. It is divided into three parts. The first part introduces ideophones and the Siwu language. The second part provides a brief overview of the use of ideophones in day-to-day discourse and then zooms in on two ritualized genres where ideophones occur perhaps unexpectedly: funeral dirges and greeting exchanges. The final part is a conclusion.

### *1.1. Ideophones*

African, Asian, and to a lesser extent Amerindian languages are known for their large inventories of ideophonic vocabulary (Voeltz & Kilian-Hatz 2001). Ideophony is a slippery notion (Childs 1994), definitions of which usually either focus on the grammatical status of ideophones or on their sound-symbolic nature (Kulemeka 1995). I employ a definition of ideophones which subverts this opposition by being broad enough to serve as a general cross-linguistic characterization of ideophonic phenomena while leaving room for the details to be spelled out for specific languages. Its elements are not intended as a list of necessary and sufficient conditions, but rather serve to define the possibility space in a way inspired by canonical typology (Corbett 2005).

(1) Ideophones are marked words that vividly depict sensory events.

Let me briefly elaborate on the elements of the definition. Ideophones are *marked* in the simple sense that they stand out from other words in several ways, including special phonotactics, expressive morphology, syntactic aloofness, and prosodic foregrounding. Ideophones are *words* (as opposed to, say, involuntary cries or nonce words), that is, they are minimal free forms that are conventionalized and have specifiable meanings (Dingemanse in prep.). Ideophones are *vivid*, turning speaker into performer by conflating speech event and narrative event. Ideophones are *depictions*; that is, their mode of signification is primarily depictive rather than descriptive. Depiction implies iconicity, a

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks are due to Oɔɔime Kanairɔ, Ruben and Ella Owiafe, and Rev. A.Y. Wurapa for teaching me about their language; to Timothy ‘T.T.’ Akuamoah for initiating the 2008 documentation event; to Kofi Agawu for making available an important collection of dirges recorded in 1986; and to my colleagues in the L&C group at the MPI for Psycholinguistics, especially Felix Ameka, Sylvia Tufvesson, and Connie de Vos for ongoing conversations about some of the issues raised in this paper.

perceived resemblance between form and meaning and indeed many ideophones are iconic (sound-symbolic) at several levels. Finally, ideophones depict *sensory events*, a shorthand for a broad spectrum of sensual impressions that may include sensory perceptions, inner feelings and sensations.

### 1.2. Siwu

Siwu (ISO 639-2: akp) is a minority language spoken north of Hohoe in Ghana's central Volta Region. Its speakers, numbering about 12,000, call themselves the *Mawu* and their land *Kawu*. The two commonly used exonyms *Akpafu* and *Lolobi* correspond to a dialectal division of the Siwu area into West and East respectively. This description focuses on the Akpafu dialect.

Siwu has traditionally been grouped with some fourteen other geographically isolated languages in the area under the heading *Togorestsprachen* (Togo Remnant Languages), nowadays more commonly called Ghana-Togo Mountain languages. Within that loose typological grouping (Blench 2006), Siwu is part of the *na*-Togo group established by Heine (1968). At a higher level, the *na*-Togo group is part of the Kwa branch of Volta-Congo, a subphylum which itself belongs to the Niger-Congo phylum.

### 1.3. Ideophones in Siwu

Ideophones are a conspicuous class of words in Siwu. The working definition given above has supplied some canonical properties which we can now enrich with more detail. Siwu ideophones are marked phonologically through sheer word length (ideophones are on average longer than verbs and nouns), deviant phonotactic patterns (e.g. long final vowels, as in *saaa* 'cool tactile sensation' or *wɔkɔlɔ* 'bulging, esp. of eyes'), and special word structures (e.g. a monosyllabic form with an extra long vowel, or a triconsonantal form  $C_1VC_2VC_3VV$ ). They are also marked by expressive morphology and prosody; about two thirds of ideophone tokens in my corpus are performatively foregrounded, meaning they freely undergo various types of reduplication lengthening, and expressive intonation.

Siwu ideophones are sound-symbolic, showing various types of form-meaning linkages. Three such linkages are DIRECT ICONITY, where the sound of the ideophone mimics a sound in the real world in onomatopoeia-like fashion (2); GESTALT ICONICITY, where the form of the ideophone resembles the aspectual structure of the event(3); and RELATIVE ICONICITY, where related forms map onto related meanings (4). Numerically, direct iconicity (onomatopoeia) is of minor importance in Siwu; the most common type found is Gestalt iconicity.

(2) *gbíim* 'sound of explosion', *tsoààà* 'sound of a waterfall'

(3)	example	word structure	event structure
	<i>yuyua</i> ‘punctual burning’	reduplication	repetition
	<i>suuu</i> ‘continuous burning’	monosyllable	unitary event
	<i>vùùù</i> ‘wind blowing’	open syllable/long V	durativity
	<i>gadàm</i> ‘stamping’	closed syllable	closure
	<i>tsòkwetsòkwε</i> ‘irregular sawing’	alternating V/tone	irregularity
	<i>dzururu</i> ‘shivering’	ABB reduplication	open-ended
	<i>gadara-gadara</i> ‘walk like a drunk’	trysyllabic + redup	complex path
(4)	<i>fèfere</i> ‘featherlight’	<i>fòfò</i> ‘light’	
	<i>saaa</i> ‘cool sensation’	<i>suuu</i> ‘burning sensation’	
	<i>pòlòpòlò</i> ‘smooth’	<i>kpòlòkpòlò</i> ‘slippery’	

The meanings of ideophones are richly detailed, typically evoking a sensory event as a whole rather than describing just an aspect or abstraction. Syntactically, there are several constructions in which ideophones may occur. Examples of the three most common ones are below: the ideophone on its own (5), in an adverbial frame (6), and in an attributive construction (7).<sup>2</sup>

- (5) *Ale Kàntò kùgò ò-sε ò-bra ù a-ra lo. Tsintsin.tsintsinsin!*  
 like NAME how 3SG-HAB 3SG-do his things UFP. IDPH.neatly.INT3  
 ‘Just like Kàntò, the way he does his stuff. Tsintsintsintsinsin!’
- (6) *bo kagbàmikù gaṅgbe ne, ka-ò-lo ma kanana.nanananana*  
 our area Cka-DEM FOC, ING-he-silence them IDPH.silent.INT5  
 ‘As for our area, it silenced them *kananananananana!*’
- (7) *kà ò-bra gelegele.gelegele*  
 ING Ci-make IDPH.shiny.INT2  
 ‘It will be shiny *gelegelegele!*’

#### 1.4. Data sources

The data reported on in this paper have been collected in two main ways: in planned and in spontaneous settings. The planned sessions involved getting people together for recording various genres of verbal art, including narratives, songs, and riddles. Some of these get-togethers, like a festival in Akpafu-

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<sup>2</sup> All examples are from a corpus of natural discourse. Abbreviations used include: 1 = first person, 2 = second person, 3 = third person, Ax = agreement where *x* is the noun class (e.g. *i*, *ka*, *ku*, *ò*), ADJ = adjectival marker, Cx = noun class marker where *x* is the class, DEM = demonstrative, FOC = focus, HAB = habitual, IDPH = ideophone, INDEF = indefinite, INGR = ingressive, INTx = expressive intensification where *x* is an impressionistic measure of intensity, NAME = proper name, NEG = negative, PF = perfective, PL = plural, POSS = possessive, PROG = progressive, PST = past, REFL = reflexive, SG = singular, SBJV = subjunctive, TP = topic marker, U = undergoer, UFP = utterance final particle.

Mempeasem in August 2007, were organized by the community; others, for example a small-scale storytelling event in August 2008, were organized by myself. A valuable collection of funeral dirges was collected at the initiative and with the help of Timothy ‘T.T.’ Akuamoah in Akpafu-Todzi in August and September 2008. Mr. Akuamoah felt that this genre of songs urgently needed to be documented since it is moribund given the age of the those that still know how to perform it (elderly women). A more direct goal was make the dirges locally available on CD for them to be played at funerals.

The second source of data is an extensive and varied corpus of video-recorded conversations, collected during fieldtrips in Spring and Summer 2008 with the explicit aim of studying ideophones in their most natural setting: situated everyday interaction. The growing corpus comprises over 10 hours of video recordings, of which 75 minutes have currently been transcribed in reasonable detail. This amounts to 3000 utterances of natural, day-to-day conversational interaction in all categories. In the transcribed part of the corpus there are 240 ideophone tokens.

## 2. IDEOPHONES IN UNEXPECTED SPEECH GENRES

Il suffit d'avoir assisté à quelques conversations de noirs, dans la liberté de la nature, lorsqu'ils n'étaient sous aucune contrainte, pour avoir remarqué quelle prodigieuse quantité d'expressions de ce genre ils ont à leur commande. (Junod 1896:196)

### *2.1. Ideophones in Siwu discursive practice: a brief overview*

In the 150-and-odd years since the first descriptions of ideophones<sup>3</sup> (Vidal 1852, Koelle 1854, Schlegel 1857), there has been no shortage of anecdotal references to the ubiquity of ideophones in speech. Somehow however, the emphasis in research on ideophones has always been on formal properties rather than contexts of use. Even though there have been excellent empirical studies of the use of ideophones (Burbridge 1938, Doke 1948, Noss 1988, Nuckolls 1996, Klassen 1999, Lydall 2000), these have focused predominantly on just one context of use: the narrative.<sup>4</sup> In order to advance our understanding of ideophones, we need a more comprehensive picture of when and why people use ideophones. Now that the collection of varied corpora has become not only possible but even desirable, this prospect has finally come within our reach.

Even a cursory inspection of the Siwu corpus makes clear that ideophones are doing a lot of communicative work in all sorts of interactions—chatter (*ikàdè*),

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<sup>3</sup> Then variously called ‘peculiar adverbs of qualification’ (Vidal), ‘specific or confined adverbs’ (Koelle), ‘Intensitätsadverbien’ (Schlegel), or ‘adverbs descriptifs’ (Junod). On the early history of the term ‘ideophone’, see Dingemanse (2008).

<sup>4</sup> Of these studies, Janis Nuckolls’ (1996) book *Sounds Like Life* stands out as the most comprehensive treatment to date of the linguistic and cultural significance of ideophones.

arguments (ikpadzē), deliberation, flirtation, gossip (*iyete*), personal stories (*iyere*), insults (*sitia*), and greeting routines (*kàyasò*). Workers squeezing palm fruit fiber to produce palm oil comment on the consistency of the substance (*pɔtɔpɔtɔ* ‘pappy, mushy’) or complain about the squeezing net (*kàba gbegbeegbe* ‘it’s stiff’); someone staring aimlessly invites comments from passersby (*àkarã kpìì* ‘he is sitting petrified’); my landlord, caught by heavy rains during work on the farm, exclaims *lobu kpetèè* ‘I am soaked to the skin’ upon his return home; and men making gunpowder anticipate the ceremonial gunfire by creating a sensory spectacle: ‘The gunmen will shoot *tawtaw*, the sound rolls in your ears *ìrròhò* and you’ll stand there benumbed *kananananana*.’

Such day to day contexts of usage form the habitat of ideophones in Siwu discursive practice. Across these usage contexts, the core interactional function of ideophones seems to be the creation of interlocutory involvement (Tannen 1989, Nuckolls 1992, Kunene 2001). As marked words, ideophones set themselves apart from the surrounding linguistic material; as a likely locus of performative foregrounding, they stimulate emotional engagement; as depictions, they supply vivid imagery and recreate sensory events in sound, inviting the listener onto the scene as it were. As Siwu speakers themselves put it, ‘you use these words to capture the attention’, ‘we use them to guide the mind to more understanding’, and ‘they make stories more interesting.’<sup>5</sup>

An analysis of everyday Siwu discourse shows that *speakers* indeed use ideophones to evoke detailed scenes and to give listeners access to their stance. *Listeners’* backchannel cues become more intense following ideophones, suggesting increasing involvement. Listeners also use ideophones, but they do slightly different interactional work with them. Often they will echo them from the speaker to signal alignment with the speaker’s perspective. They may also supply their own as a particularly powerful way of saying ‘I’m with you’, in effect demonstrating their involvement.

In short, ideophones occur profusely in daily interaction in Siwu. Their occurrence across a wide range of discourse genres raises the question what kind of specialized uses may arise out of the prototypical role of the ideophone as an involvement strategy. It is with this question in mind that we are going to look at the use of ideophones in two distinct speech genres, both of them stylized and ritualized in their own ways: funeral dirges and greeting exchanges.

## 2.2. Ideophones in funeral dirges

Funeral dirges (*sìnɔ* in Siwu) are a special genre of verbal-musical art performed during the period of public mourning preceding a burial. The musical structures of these dirges and their place in the larger context of the funeral have been described in considerable detail in a series of studies by Kofi Agawu (1988, 1989,

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<sup>5</sup> These comments come from several discussions with linguistically naïve speakers of Siwu. Rather than asking ‘why do you use ideophones?’, I solicited comments after elicitation tasks involving ideophones and while transcribing conversations (‘why does she use that word here?’; ‘what if he told the story without these words?’).

1990). This short paper cannot do full justice to the poetic and musical complexity of the dirges, nor to their ethnographic context; it merely looks at the role of ideophones in some of them. All examples below come from planned recording sessions, since the dirges are rarely sung at funerals and wakekeepings nowadays.<sup>6</sup> About a quarter of dirges (12 out of a collection of 54) prominently feature one or more ideophones.<sup>7</sup> It is not just one ideophone that happens to be used across 12 dirges; the number of distinct ideophone types is 12, and the number of ideophone tokens (using line counts as a rough measure) is 26.

Consider the dirge below, titled *Milo kananaa* ‘Be still *kananaa*’. The dirge, giving voice to the realization that death strikes everyone —childless women just as well as nursing mothers— revolves around the ideophone *kanana*, evoking a tranquil silence. Text, melody, and performance work together to create a compelling work of art.<sup>8</sup>

- (8) CALL            *mìlo kanana si mìse i mi ayo*  
 RESPONSE       *mìlo kananaa*  
 STANZA          *ɔlemã ìwo, ɔtalepo ìwo, mìloo*  
                       *ɔlemã sise, ɔtalepo sise*  
                       *mìlo kanana si mìse i mi ayo*

be still *kanana* and stay in your houses

be still *kananaa*

(see) the childless woman’s grave, the nursing woman’s grave, be still

(see) the childless woman’s mound, the nursing woman’s mound

be still *kanana* and stay in your houses

Ideophones also play a crucial role in the *Kàsò kàla gbigbiigbi* ‘the earth is trembling’ (9). The imagery is that of death as a passage from one world to the next (they have arrived, i.e. in the next world). The loss of a dear one is pictured almost literally as a ‘hard hit’, leaving the earth physically trembling (*gbigbiigbi*) and the nearest relatives emotionally drained (*dzɔlɔlɔ* ‘tediously long’ evokes feelings of depression and fatigue).

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<sup>6</sup> Two factors are contributing to the decline of funeral dirges in Kawu: first of all the fact that many churches discourage their use, preferring edifying hymns and gospel songs instead; and secondly, the arrival of electricity in the villages halfway through the nineties, which has led to a veritable arms race for sound systems to play loud gospel music during wakekeepings. The vocally performed dirges are no match for this.

<sup>7</sup> These rough statistics cover only the dirges recorded in the period 2007-2009. Kofi Agawu has recently sent me another collection of 58 funeral dirges recorded in 1986 which I have not had the chance to analyse yet; he notes that this collection too is ‘rich in ideophones’ (p.c. August 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Audio recordings of the dirges can be found at <http://ideophone.org/publications/LDLT2/>.

- (9) ALL kàsò kàla **gbìgbìgbì**  
 ɔ̀rò marò òbo eee  
 maɔ̀rò òbo eee  
 kàla **gbìgbìgbì**  
 maɔ̀rò òbo aaa  
 kùkpi-seri sià òkpeseri ɔ̀naà  
 be bo bà kàyi ga **dzòlòlò** boaɔ̀i boɔ̀e?

the earth keeps on trembling *gbìgbìgbì*  
 arriving, they are arriving  
 they have arrived;  
 it keeps trembling *gbìgbìgbì*  
 they have arrived  
 there's a way there, but no way back  
 what have we come for in this tedious life, what will we gain?

Funeral dirges such as these are crucial in containing, orienting, and channeling the feelings of loss and pathos surrounding death. Ideophones, with their evocative semantics and strong ties to emotional involvement, are wonderfully fit to help evoke these powerful feelings. It is easy to see a relation to the availability of ideophones as an involvement strategy in everyday conversation.

However, ideophones are not simply taken over wholesale from everyday interactional patterns. An important difference with everyday usage is that the usual interactional strategies for signalling alignment and involvement are unavailable in this stylized format. What remains is the ideophone's power to evoke vivid imagery and to move both performers and audience. In a way, then, the use of ideophones in funeral dirges may be said to be derived from prototypical speakers' use of ideophones.

### 2.3. Ideophones in greetings

Elaborate greeting exchanges are common in West Africa, and Kawu is no exception (Agawu 1995:42-45).<sup>9</sup> In an important overview study of greetings, Duranti (1997) draws attention to the fact that many studies have focused on the social functions, sequential organization, or illocutionary force of greetings, while considering the actual verbal content of only secondary importance (a point also made by Ameka 1991:499-500). If the present discussion does the opposite by focusing on verbal content to the neglect of some of the other perspectives, it is only because this is not the place for a comprehensive account of greetings, which would certainly require the drawing together of all of these strands of inquiry.

The Siwu greeting exchange consists of one or more adjacency pairs, the verbal content of which varies with the time of day and with the time elapsed since the last exchange. Greetings are obligatory except under specified

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<sup>9</sup> For a fine-grained anthropological linguistic analysis of a wide range of greeting exchanges in a neighbouring society, see Ameka (1991:385-388, 499-555).



conditions (e.g. on the way to the toilet). The minimally appropriate exchange consists of one adjacency pair which is used in situations when circumstances or social relationships prevent a longer and more contextual exchange. Example (10) gives the first (and minimal) adjacency pair of the morning greeting (this discussion will be limited to the morning exchange). Speaker A uses a greeting verb with pronominal elements which vary according to speaker and addressee number (cf. *bò ya mì* ‘we greet you-PL’). Addressee B replies with a formulaic inquiry into the well-being of A. This reply can likewise be pluralised (*mì r□ kpoo?* ‘did you-PL sleep well?’).

- |        |  |   |   |
|--------|--|---|---|
| (10) A | <i>lò-ya</i> <i>ḍ</i><br>1SG-greet 2SG.OBJ<br>‘I greet you!’ | B | <i>a-rε</i> <i>kpoo-o</i><br>2SG-sleep IDPH.serene-Q<br>‘Did you sleep well?’ |
|--------|--|---|---|

The main point of interest for us here is that the reply features the ideophone *kpoo*, evoking serenity and silence. This makes *kpoo* probably one of the most frequently heard ideophones in Siwu, at least during morning time (the minimal afternoon and evening sequences do not contain ideophones). Exchanges featuring it occur 15 times in the corpus. *Kpoo* is not limited to this context, however; it can also be used to describe someone who is timidly sitting still, and it is frequently heard in calls for silence (*mìlo kpooo!* ‘you-PL be silent!’).

Morning greeting exchanges often extend beyond the minimal form given above. The exact form they take depends on a myriad of factors — social relationships, kinship ties, time since last encounter, social debts, the activity either participant is (going to be) involved in, etc. For people close to each other, it can include detailed inquiries into the wellbeing of other members of the household; for travellers returning home, it may fluidly transition into an exchange of the latest news. One type of extension I commonly heard (and occasionally participated in) is the one in (11)-(13).

- |        |  |   |   |
|--------|--|---|---|
| (11) A | <i>màturi</i> <i>ḍ</i> <i>rε-ε?</i><br>people 2SG.OBJ sleep-Q<br>‘Did your people sleep well?’ | B | <i>i</i> <i>mḵ-ḍ</i> <i>rε-ε?</i><br>? 3PL-2SG.OBJ sleep-Q<br>‘Did yours sleep?’                              |
| (12) A | <i>a-sarε-ε?</i><br>2SG-be.healthy-Q<br>‘Are you well?’  | B | <i>aĩ, lo-sarε</i> <i>ló!</i><br>yes 1SG-be.healthy UFP<br>‘Yes, I am fine indeed!’                           |
| (13) A | <i>kpokporo-kpo-o?</i><br>IDPH.hard-INT1-Q<br>‘Going strong <i>kpokporokpo?</i> ’              | B | <i>kpokporo-kpo</i> <i>alε</i> <i>ìta</i><br>IDPH.hard-INT1 like stone<br>‘ <i>Kpokporokpo</i> like a stone!’ |

In this extended sequence of questions and responses, which would follow (10), there is first a further general inquiry into the wellbeing of the household (11), and

then two pairs of turns aimed at the addressee personally (12-13). There is a definite ordering to this sequence from the general and formulaic to the increasingly personal, culminating in the ideophonic question and answer sequence in (13). The image conveyed by *kpokporo* in this context is one of bodily hardness ('going strong' or 'being in glowing health'), a positively valuated state which is in opposition to bodily weakness, for which there are also several ideophones (e.g. *gbiððð* 'weak', *ɣekpetee* 'fragile').

One consultant, reflecting on what interlocutors might be trying to do in a turn like (13) above, commented that 'they *really* want to know how you are'. In other words, the ideophone contributes a layer of empathy to the greeting sequence which starts out as essentially phatic; it helps build a strong sense of interpersonal involvement. An interesting piece of serendipitous evidence for this comes from an obituary note in a funeral memorial booklet:<sup>10</sup>

In Akpafu language there is a word which is used to describe an individuals state of health. The word is "Krukrukru". Mama Dzua always greeted close, extended family members as well as all people in the community "Krukrukru" with a big, broad smile on her face. She was not used to greeting our children in the general way "How are the children?" but by their names "How is Eli? How is Mawuli? How is Awo Ya? Etc. etc. (Wurapa family 2007:4)

Note that this biographical anecdote explicitly makes a distinction between the 'general way' of greeting and a more personally involved approach, and that both the mentioning of individual children and the use of the ideophone *krukrukru* are examples of the latter, more personally involved style. On a similar note, even if *kpoo* (the ideophone occurring in the minimal greeting exchange) may have lost some of its emotional expressivity in its now formulaic context, the fact that it was recruited there in the first place points to the importance of not just phatic communion, but a true sense of interpersonal involvement in Siwu greetings.

The use of ideophones in greetings, then, is a natural outgrowth of their availability as a key involvement strategy in everyday discourse. It is different from that, however, in that speakers are using ideophones in questions for the other's well-being, primarily signalling their own involvement and engagement rather than soliciting the other's. In that sense, and only slightly exaggerating, we may say that ideophones in greetings are more like listeners' use of ideophones.

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<sup>10</sup> Funeral services in Ghana are usually accompanied by a memorial booklet containing the order of service as well as biographical notes and personal statements by close family members of the deceased. Such booklets are always in English, though I know that in this case the text was written by a native speaker of Siwu (Akpafu). Mama Dzua was a member of the family I stayed with in Akpafu-Mempeasem; her passing away and the funeral preceded my coming to Kawu.

## 3. CONCLUSION

This brief paper has offered a demonstration of how language documentation, in the form of the collection of varied corpora, can inform linguistic theorizing about ideophones. Corpus data from Siwu, apart from providing empirical support for the claim that ideophones serve as a device for creating interlocutory involvement (Nuckolls 1992, Kunene 1965), shows that ideophones occur across a wide range of discourse genres, some of them well beyond the traditional narrow focus on narrative contexts of use. Taking two such ‘unexpected’ genres, funeral dirges and greetings, I have shown that the use of ideophones in each of them is distinctive while at the same time building on core interactional functions of ideophones in everyday conversational discourse.

In a brief note on Zande ideophones, Evans-Pritchard (1962:145) speculated that ‘[pervasively ideophonic languages]... are not so much a type of language as a revelation in language of a type of mentality’. More recently, Kofi Agawu has suggested that the expressive modes of West-African societies are shot through with a deep sense of communality — a ‘communal ethos’ (Agawu 2006). The empirical study of how ideophones help build and maintain this communal ethos in social interaction is still in its infancy. I offer this small contribution in the hope that others may be induced to explore these issues in more depth.

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