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Onomatopoeia in Iraqw

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6 Onomatopoeia in Iraqw

1 Introduction

Iraqw is a Cushitic (Afroasiatic) language spoken by about half a million people in Northern Tanzania (LOT 2009). Most Iraqw are bilingual in Swahili, Tanzania's national language. Like all other ethnic languages of Tanzania, Iraqw has no official status and is not used in education or in any official context. Nonetheless, Iraqw is still widely spoken and acquired naturally by children.

The language is agglutinative with verb-final syntax (for a brief grammar sketch, see Mous 2020; for a full grammar, see Mous 1993). A dictionary (Mous, Qorro, and Kiessling 2002) and collections of Iraqw texts (Berger and Kiessling 1998; Wada 1976; Mous and Sanka 2009) are available. Mous and Sanka (2014) have reported on the function of sound symbolism in Iraqw oral verbal art, and Mous (2000) has reported on riddles in Iraqw, which is of interest since many riddles are built on sound symbolism. Alphonse (2021) provides an extensive study on how Iraqw communicate with their domestic animals.

The data for this paper were gathered in a rural area, *Irqwá da/aw*, considered the homeland of the Iraqw people.

2 Position of onomatopoeia in the language system

During the collection of onomatopoeias for this project, I noticed that not all are conventionalised and that there is considerable variation in how speakers render and interpret onomatopoeias. Some were imagined on the spot and would differ from person to person and from time to time. For example, some suggested the sound that a frog makes to be *rrrra*, while others gave *qwararahh*. I call onomatopoeia all those sound-imitating words that need not be (completely) lexicalised and may vary from speaker to speaker. As soon as they are conventional, onomatopoeias adhere to all of the Iraqw-internal word class-defining properties of ideophones.

Like many other African languages, Iraqw has ideophones. The Iraqw word category of conventional onomatopoeias (and ideophones) can be defined by the morphological and syntactic properties discussed in section 3.2.2. Ideophones and interjections were included in the dictionary (Mous et al. 2002), as were onomatopoeias, but these were marked as ideophones. Another term to introduce here is 'interjection'. Alphonse (2021) studied a subtype of interjections used in conative addresses to domestic animals.

Onomatopoeias do not form a closed category. There is some productivity. Any speaker can imagine a manner to reproduce a certain sound. Once there is a beginning

of conventionalisation, the onomatopoeia can undergo verbalisation. There is little to no expansion through borrowing.

The language from which Iraqw borrows in general is currently Swahili, Tanzania's national language. However, the sound system of Iraqw is so different from Swahili that speakers tend to use Iraqw sounds for sound imitation rather than copying onomatopoeia from Swahili.

Certain tendencies of association of sound and meaning, of iconicity, can be discerned. Onomatopoeias with *i* commonly indicate a sudden movement (1a), but not all onomatopoeias with *i* fall into this category (1b). Onomatopoeias with *a* typically indicate movement to two opposite sides (2a), but here, too, they are used for different sensations (2b).

- (1) a. Onomatopoeias with the vowel *i* (sudden movement)
 - fi'* sound of fast movement.
 - hii* sound of something passing fast
 - kif* sudden unexpected movement
 - pitl* sound of sudden snapping of a cord under tension, of cutting
- b. Onomatopoeias with the vowel *i* (others)
 - tlíx* something being slit, ripping, something falling on a surface
 - tsirx* fall bit by bit, picking by birds, drops of water dripping.
 - wiirwiir* ~ *wiriwiri* swing, moving in circles
- (2) a. Onomatopoeias with the vowel *a* (up and down, back and forth)
 - sakw* ~ *sak* jumpy, walking in jumping fashion.
 - tsaxw* sound of jumping on the ground.
 - tambal* twisted movements.
- b. Onomatopoeias with the vowel *a* (others)
 - slámáhh* sound of crushing something soft and juicy, e.g., a fruit between the teeth
 - slap* sound of fainting, flame of a lamp going out
 - faahh* sound of water falling in a spray like rain

3 Description of onomatopoeia

3.1 Phonology

3.1.1 Vowel and consonant inventory

Iraqw has five vowels /i, e, a, o, u/ that each have a long counterpart /ii, ee, aa, oo, uu/; in addition, there are two rising diphthongs /ay, aw/. Iraqw's consonants are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1: Iraqw consonant phonemes in orthography.¹

	labial	alveolar	palatal	lateral	velar	labialised velar	uvular	labialised uvular	pharyngeal	glottal
voiced stop	b	d	j		g	gw			/	ʔ
voiceless stop	p	t	ch		k	kw	q	qw		
eject.		ts		tl						
affricate										
fricative	f	s	sh	sl	x	xw			hh	h
nasal	m	n	ny		ng	ngw				
liquid			l							
trill		r								
glide			y			w				

¹ The following non-IPA symbols and digraphs are used in the Iraqw orthography in this article and may not be self-evident: *ng* is a voiced velar nasal stop [ŋ], and between vowels it is followed by the oral velar voiced stop [ŋɡ]; *ts* is a voiceless ejective alveolar affricate; *tl* is a voiceless ejective palatal stop with lateral release; *sl* is a voiceless lateral fricative; *hh* is a pharyngeal voiceless fricative; and */* is a pharyngeal voiced fricative followed by creaky voice.

Iraqw onomatopoeias do not use sounds that are not present in the language. Deviant sounds such as clicks are used, however, in conative interjections to call animals (Alphonse 2021) and in some other interjections; for example, the palatal click is used to express irritation.

Where there is variation in the realisation of onomatopoeia (with no difference in meaning), it appears that the exact place of articulation is relaxed a bit. The initial consonant (or final consonant) oscillates between *g* and *q* (velar or post-velar) (3b). On the other hand, the crucial factor is place of articulation for some onomatopoeias with an initial labial consonant for which the manner of articulation can vary, e.g., *p* ~ *f* ~ *w* in (3a).

- (3) a. variation in onomatopoeia
fisaáhh sound of something spreading (esp. grains)
 variation: *fisaáhh* ~ *pisaahh* ~ *wisaahh*.
- b. initial consonant is any of the labial consonants
gunts sound of a gulp, to gulp
 variation: *gunts* ~ *qunts*
- c. initial consonant is velar or uvular stop
pu/ sound of something falling on the ground
 variation: *pu/* ~ *púx*

3.1.2 Syllabic structure

All syllables in Iraqw have an onset (the glottal stop as the onset of a word is not written); the peak consists of a long or short vowel, and the coda is empty or consists of a single consonant or a homorganic nasal-oral stop combination. In polysyllabic words, the syllable boundary is between the nasal and the oral stop, e.g., *tlaank* ‘deny’ and *taam\$pa* ‘blind being’. Hence, the common Iraqw syllable structure is CV(V)(C). The minimum word is a heavy syllable.

Iraqw could be claimed to be mora-based on the basis of the fact that vowel length plays a role in the common root type of nouns in which the second syllable contains a long *ee*, *aa*, or *oo* while the first one contains a short *i*, *a*, or *u*. This property of mora- or syllable-base is not crucial for Iraqw as there is no poetry with rhythmic constraints based on counting mora (or syllables).

Onomatopoeias, interjections and ideophones show deviations from these phonotactic principles. Onomatopoeias do make use of sound sequences that are not used elsewhere in the language, as in the onomatopoeia for the sound of the frog *rrrrra* with an extra-long *r*. The onomatopoeia for a spider making a web, and the sound of a sewing machine, is *rrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr*, just the trill consonant with expressive length. There are no onomatopoeias with vowels only.

A recurrent structure for onomatopoeia is CvCvhh (4). In the non-expressive part of the lexicon, this specific structure is rare and only occurs for the numeral ‘four’, *tsiyáhh*. Another recurrent typical shape for onomatopoeia is a monosyllabic word with a syllable closed by *k* (5).

(4) Onomatopoeias with the structure CiCáhh

<i>fisaáhh</i>	sound of something spreading (esp. grains)
<i>slamahh</i>	sound of crushing something soft and juicy, e.g., a fruit between the teeth
<i>siwáhh</i>	noise of shaking gourd with stones, sound of wind or falling water, grains or glass in pieces, machine milling grain, falling tree, be welcome heartily
<i>gwerehh</i>	sound of quick jumps, quick moves of antelopes
<i>mugúhh</i>	sound of chewing
<i>hhuúmbaáhh</i>	sound that a cow makes

(5) Onomatopoeias with the structure Cvk

<i>buk</i>	sound of something dropping down
<i>duk</i>	sound of fast movement, fan
<i>hhuk</i>	sound indicating fast movement

In addition to those mentioned in (4), a relatively high number of onomatopoeias end in a pharyngeal fricative, voiceless *hh* [h] or voiced / [ʕ] (6) (see also (12)). Both sounds are typical of Iraqw and are not present in most other languages of Tanzania. The harshness of the friction of these sounds makes them particularly apt for expressive words.

(6) Onomatopoeias (and ideophones) ending in a pharyngeal fricative

<i>mee/</i>	sound of sheep
<i>pa/</i>	sound of sudden shooting out, sound of silence
<i>pu/</i> or <i>púx</i>	sound of something falling on the ground
<i>tluwaa/</i>	sound of gunfire
<i>pa/</i>	sound of a sudden slap, a sudden departure or silence
<i>kí/</i> or <i>kíq</i>	ideophone that refers to darkness or something closed tightly
<i>lampee/</i>	ideophone that refers to a slow gait or movement
<i>laa/</i>	ideophone that refers to a swaying movement
<i>faahh</i>	sound of water falling in a spray like rain
<i>gwerehh</i>	sound of quick jumps, quick moves of antelopes
<i>kududuhh</i>	sound of thunder, of running
<i>kurhh</i>	sound of a double beat
<i>saáhh</i>	sound of a whisper

3.1.3 Stress

Iraqw is a tone language and has no stress.

3.1.4 Tone

Iraqw is a restricted tone language. It is restricted in two ways. Firstly, tone is distinctive on the final syllable of the word, and secondly, it is primarily used for grammatical encoding and only rarely for lexical distinction, as is the case in a number of other Cushitic languages (Mous 2021). Tone occurs on onomatopoeias (also ideophones and interjections), where it can be expressive (extra high) and where it is not restricted to the final syllable of the word.

3.2 Morphology and syntax

3.2.1 Word-formation

Iraqw is probably quite exceptional cross-linguistically in having a verbaliser *-eeliim* that applies specifically to words for sounds. For example, *hhuheeliim* (v) ‘bark (of dog), grumble’ is derived from *hhuh* for the sound that a dog makes (7). The suffix can be recognised in verbs for sounds that insects make, as in *biieeliim* (v) ‘drone (of bees)’ from *bíííí* ‘sound of bee(s)’, or *tsiieeliim* (v) ‘drone (of mosquitoes)’ from *tsíííí* ‘sound of mosquitoes’.

- (7) *Kár an gár ay laarí Seeay*
 well COP-EXPEC thing:F:CON DIR today Dog
bar tsi’itá gaa ngaa sláy ís hhuheelaalin!
 COND smell:F:CON thing O3:O.F:PF get:3M 3SG bark:IMPFV:3M
 ‘It is until today that when Dog smells something, he barks.’

(Wada 1976: story 15)

The suffix is not restricted to resulting in verbs denoting the hearing sense; it can also be used to verbalise expressive words for vision, as in *miitseeeliim* (v) ‘glitter, sparkle’ from *miits* ‘sound of fire’. Moreover, the same derivation is used on ideophones that depict a sensation such as pain: e.g., *gon’eeliim* (v) ‘undergo the sensation of a boil being squashed’ from *gono*, ideophone for ‘pain in the head’.

The suffix *-eeliim* is productive and can be used for any conventionalised sound emission (onomatopoeia) or sound-symbolic expression (ideophone). The sound *nyaw* that the cat makes is quite standard (even worldwide), and a verb can be derived from it as *nyaweeliim* or *miyaweeeliim* (8). Less conventional sound emission renderings can

productively be used with the derivation *-eeliim* but with an adaptation so that the verb obeys the core phonology of the language. For example, the sound that a frog makes was suggested to be *rrrra*, and its derivation is *raahheeliim* (9). But other speakers use *qwararaeeliim* and give *qwararahh* as the sound for the frog. Verbs that are derived from sounds stay within the core phonology of Iraqw: there is no high tone, vowel or consonant lengthening, or repetition in these verbs. Once onomatopoeias are used as a verb derived by *-eeliim*, they may receive all the inflectional markers as any other verb.

- (8) *maytsí i nyaweeliín ~ miyaweeliín*
 cat.F 3 miauw:3F
 ‘The cat is meowing.’

- (9) *amaxupi i qwararaeeliín ~ raahheeliín*
 frog.F 3 make.noise:3F
 ‘The frog is making its noise.’

The suffix *-eeliim* shows how the Iraqw language combines sounds and the sensation of sounds with other sensations. The verbaliser *-eeliim* is used with some interjections. For example, the interjection for attention *xáy* has *xayeeliim* as a verb. On the other hand, an interjection such as *karr* ‘and then’, which is not confined to direct speech, does not take this verbaliser suffix. The base has to refer to a sound or to any (combination of) sensory impressions expressed in a sound.

Onomatopoeias are often repeated, especially the short ones, to express a repeated action (10). The repetition can be as often as the speaker wants, and it is always the full word that is repeated.

- (10) *Ku-na al-/akmiitiike*
 IMPS:O.M-PAST together-run:IMPFV:PRED:NEG:PRED:QUES
as xob xob xob aako ti’iingo.
 because xob xob xob old.man running
 ‘They ran after him, didn’t they, like *xob xob xob*, an old man running.’
 (Mous and Sanka 2014: story of Lách)

Reduplication in onomatopoeia does occur and can be both partial and complete, as illustrated in example (11).

- (11) *xosloslo* ‘sound of rustling, owning many things’
boxo’oo ‘sound of treading’

3.2.2 Syntax

Onomatopoeias often form a clause on their own, typically following a clause that describes the event (17). This second clause can be, and often is, introduced by the verb *oo* ‘to say’ (12–14). Other verbs of saying are not used for this purpose. Onomatopoeias can also be introduced by the preposition *as* ‘because of, like’ (15–16). Such a prepositional phrase of *as* plus onomatopoeia is usually clause-final. In fact, when the onomatopoeia is verbalised into an inflected verb, it occurs clause-finally as Iraqw is a verb-final language. The commonality of these various syntactic options for onomatopoeias (and other ideophones) is that they tend to occur after the description of the content of the event or in lieu of a description as a vivid description of the central action of the event.

- (12) *kar ba'armo i-na oó': xíing*
 well bee 3-PAST say:3M ONOM
 ‘The bee said: *xíing* (sound of stinging).’
- (13) *tsunqa n-i-na oo'-iyé': tlíx*
 saliva.P PL-3-PAST say-3P:PAST ONOM
 ‘The saliva said: *tlíx*. (sound of something falling onto a surface).’
- (14) *ta-na oó': xásl; ta-na xasl<m>iít*
 IMPS-PAST say:3M ONOM IMPS-PAST keep.silent<IMPFV>:3M
 ‘They said: *xasl* (sound of silence); they kept silent.’
- (15) *ta-na ar~arán as slap slap*
 IMPS-PAST see~IMPFV:3M because ONOM
 ‘They saw each other and *slap slap* (sound of collapsing).’
- (16) *ku-na al /akmiit-ií-ke as xob xob xob*
 O3:IMPS:O.M-PAST together run-3M:PRED:QUES-NEG:PRED REAS ONOM
 ‘They ran after him, didn’t they? And *xob xob* (sound of irregular running).’
- (17) *neewo-r-ós ga-na neerís ar bará daandú*
 thread-F-3SG.POSS O3:O.F-PAST spread:3F INDEP.CON.F in:CON back:CON
ma’ay. hii
 water ONOM
 ‘She (the spider) made her thread over the water: *hii* (sound of passing fast).’

The morphosyntactically defining properties of onomatopoeias (and ideophones) can be summarised as follows.

1. An onomatopoeia can be and often is introduced by the verb *oo* ‘to say’ (12–14)
2. An onomatopoeia often forms a clause on its own (17)

3. An onomatopoeia is used as a complement of the preposition *as* ‘because of’ (15–16)
4. An onomatopoeia can be verbalised by the suffix *-eeliim* (7–9)
5. An onomatopoeia can be used as a verb in a sentence with verbal derivational and inflectional suffixes (14)

3.3 Semantics

3.3.1 General

Iraqw society tends to use Swahili when discussing phenomena that are typical for the modern state and Iraqw for their daily activities and natural environment. Conventionalised onomatopoeias for instruments, vehicles and machines are rare, while those for the natural environment are common. Onomatopoeias are commonly used in storytelling in order to evoke a vivid rendering of the situation. This includes sounds related to different types of movement, speed of movement, and unexpectedness. For example, in the story of Lách, the following sentences occur: ‘They chased the old man *xob xob xob* [sound of an old man running]’; Lach jumped *kút* [sound of a sudden fall] down on the floor’; and ‘Mother says: *ssip* [sound of pounding grain]’. Examples (12–17) above are all from stories. Such sound types are richly presented, while those for modern instruments in the broader sense of the word have a poorer representation.

3.3.2 Semantic relations

Iraqw does not show synonymy and homonymy in high numbers, which may be related to the fact that words are relatively long and the phoneme system is rich. The number of pairs in the dictionary of entries that are the same in form but different in meaning is low: homonyms are rare. The occurrence of synonymy and polysemy depends to a large extent on the detail of the description and semantic analysis. The Iraqw dictionary tends to highlight detailed semantic differences in words with similar English equivalents and to consider a range of equivalent senses as representing one core meaning.

Polysemy in onomatopoeias occurs in Iraqw in the absence of our understanding of the iconic association and the range of expressive power of these words. In that superficial outsider view, one observes polysemy in, for example, *tlíx* for something being slit, ripping, or falling on a surface, *tsirx* for falling bit by bit, picking by birds, and drops of water dripping, and *sláp* for the sound of fainting and a flame of a lamp going out. Synonymous onomatopoeias occur before these are fully conventionalised, as in the case of the sound that a frog makes being either *rrrra* or *qwararahh*.

The term onomatopoeia refers to sound and hence to the hearing sense. A semantic study of onomatopoeia requires the inclusion of ideophones as well. This allows us to

realise that the iconic relation between the sound and its approximation in the onomatopoeia extends to other senses. In Iraqw, as in many African languages, onomatopoeias form a subgroup of a wider category of ideophones that refer not only to sound but also to other senses that are subsumed under the association related to hearing. For example, the ideophone *qip* refers to something closed and dark or full. Movement and light combine in the ideophone *kalankalay* for something colourful with various bright colours or something swaying, like a moving bicycle wheel in the sun or the gait of a girl with a skirt full of beads. Iraqw ideophones do not refer to smell.

Once an onomatopoeia is derived into a verb, this verb can develop its own specific meaning in which the original sense is recognisable but has developed into a different and specific meaning. For example, *xosloslo'oos* 'to massacre, mow down dry maize stalks' is a causative derivation based on the onomatopoeia *xosloslo* 'sound of rustling' and *slapiit* 'hide quickly downwards' is the middle derivation of the onomatopoeia *sláp* 'sound of fainting'. Moreover, a noun like *xwaa'ari* (f) 'crow, white-necked raven' is clearly named after its call *xwa xwa*.

4 Conclusion

In many languages, onomatopoeias may contain sounds that otherwise do not function in the phonological system of the language. These have not been found in Iraqw. Onomatopoeias do contain deviant phonological features such as the combination *rk* in word-final position, as in *tsirstsirk* 'sound of birds picking, drops of water falling', and the long *s* in *ssipssip* 'sound of pounding'. We may also notice the expressive value of vowel length and high tone. Thus, the vowel in *húúú* can be lengthened, and the tone can be higher to express the speed and duration of a spider producing its thread (17), and in (16), *xob* can be repeated ad libitum to indicate the duration of the walk and its particular quality, which is not the case in the various grammatical processes of reduplication in Iraqw (Mous 2013). The initial *s* in *ssipssip* 'sound of pounding' can also be expressively lengthened. However, there is no extra high tone, vowel or consonant lengthening, or repetition in verbs that are based on onomatopoeia. Verbs derived with *-eeliim* have an adapted version of the sound as their base and stay within the core phonology.

Collecting the ways various sounds are rendered in Iraqw poses the challenge of how conventional these are. For a number of domestic animals, there is a conventional way to refer to the sound they make. These are discussed in Alphonce (2021), and some are repeated here. For less common animals, there are individual variations in how people imitate their sounds, provided they are aware of the sound the animal makes. For example, for the sound of the baboon, one person gave *hhohho*, another could not reproduce it, and while someone else gave *húhúhúhú*, another claimed that would be

the sound of the monkey, /awtu. One person volunteered *fúuf* for the rhinoceros but admitted never having seen one. Some wild animal cries are so iconic and common that they have conventional words to refer to their cries: the hyena, often heard at night, says *hhaawú* and the crow says *xwaaxw* or *xwa-xwa*. The word for the ‘crow’, *xwaa’ari*, is based on this conventionalised sound, and *hhaawú* is occasionally used as the nickname of the hyena (*baha*) in stories. These animals are known to the Iraqw, and speakers are ready to volunteer their sound(s), something which cannot be said about the musical instruments from the data sheet (see appendix), which are completely unknown in the area. The one exception is the drum, which goes *dung*, for which the verb *dungeeliim* can be derived. Machines such as the grinding machine or a car make the conventional sound *xurú*. Some other conventional sounds of modern utensils are for a church bell, *gong*, and a gun, *tuwaahh*.

In addition to the wide variation with which people provide renderings of sounds when prompted, there is understandable variation in more conventional renderings of common sounds. For example, most people give *tuwaahh* for the sound of the gun, but occasionally, *tihahh* is also heard. Such variation equally exists in onomatopoeias, e.g., *pu/* or *púx* is given for the sound of something falling on the ground, and the sound for gulping can be *gunts* or *qunts*.

List of abbreviations

3 third person, CON construct case, COND conditional, COP copula, DIR directional, EXPEC expectative, F feminine, IMPFV imperfective, IMPS impersonal, INDEP independent, M masculine, NEG negative, O object, ONOM onomatopoeia, PF perfect, PRED predicative, REAS reason, QUES questioning

Appendix

SOUND TYPES		ONOMATOPOEIA	MEANING
NATURAL SOUNDS 4 ELEMENTS	WATER	<i>tlumburuuq</i>	fall of solid object into liquid, splashing
		<i>faahh</i>	rain (pattering)
	AIR	<i>fukukuu’</i>	wind (all sorts)
		<i>kududu’</i>	storm/thunder
	EARTH	<i>qaygegege</i>	creaking wood/trees
		<i>pitsitsitsitsi’</i>	stones/rocks
	FIRE	<i>miits</i>	fire (any sort)
		<i>weree/</i>	crackling fire

(continued)

SOUND TYPES		ONOMATOPOEIA	MEANING
NATURAL SOUNDS	MAMMALS	<i>huhh</i>	dog
		<i>nyáu</i>	cat
	BIRDS	<i>korokoro, qoqó</i>	rooster
		<i>xwaaxw</i>	crow
	REPTILES AND AMPHIBIANS	<i>rrrra, qwararahh</i>	frog
		<i>mandoróq</i>	snake (for its movement)
	INSECTS	<i>bííííí</i>	bee/wasp/hornet
		<i>tsííííí</i>	mosquito/fly
	FISH AND SEA CREATURES		(not relevant in the area)
	HUMAN	VOICE	<i>saahh</i>
<i>/orootl</i>			growl
BODY		<i>túhh, kutkut</i>	heartbeat
		<i>sakw</i>	walk (in a jumping way), footsteps
MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS		<i>dung</i>	drums/percussion
ARTIFACTS	VEHICLES	<i>xurú</i>	car
	MECHANICAL AND ELECTRONIC EQUIPMENT AND DEVICES	<i>tutuhh, xurú</i>	grinding machine
	INSTRUMENTS OF WAR AND DESTRUCTION	<i>tihhaahh, tuwaahh</i>	gun, rifle
	BELLS, GONGS AND OTHER SIGNALING EQUIPMENT	<i>gong gong</i>	(church) bell
		<i>tsíngíli</i>	bicycle bell or small bell

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