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► **To cite this version:**

Isabelle Bril. Onomatopoeia in Northern Amis. Livia Körtvélyessy; Pavol Štekauer. Onomatopoeia in the World's Languages, 10, De Gruyter, pp.805-816, 2024, Comparative Handbooks of Linguistics [CHL], 978-3-11-105155-0. 10.1515/9783111053226-067 . hal-04612442

HAL Id: hal-04612442

<https://hal.science/hal-04612442>

Submitted on 14 Jun 2024

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ONOMATOPOEIA IN NORTHERN AMIS

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1. Introduction

Amis¹ is one of the fourteen surviving Austronesian languages of Taiwan. It is spoken along the eastern coast and has four main dialects: Northern, Tavalong-Vataan, Central, and Southern. These dialects have significant differences in phonology, lexicon and morphosyntax (Tsuchida 1988).

The Amis population has been estimated at around 130,000 people; however, based on native speakers' information and my own observations, the number of fluent speakers is much lower, and the great majority of younger people under thirty have passive knowledge of Amis. It is thus a potentially endangered language since transmission is not ensured.

Amis is morphologically agglutinative, with a wealth of inflectional and derivational affixes, including infixes and circumfixes; it has a Philippine-type system of voices and a bipartite alignment system.²

2. Position of onomatopoeia in the language system

Amis has no specific label for onomatopoeia,³ which instead are referred to as sound-imitating words. They are “words that depict sensory imagery” (Dingemanse 2011: 25). The primary onomatopoeia listed and discussed here imitate sounds; some also occur as secondary onomatopoeia derived as verbs or nouns.

Onomatopoeia are an underdescribed topic in Formosan languages, with the exception of Lee's (2017) analysis of ideophones and onomatopoeia in Sediq and Kavalan. No published linguistic work is devoted to onomatopoeia in Amis; the three existing dictionaries, mostly of Central Amis (Fey 1986, Poinot and Pourrias 1966, Rata 2013), mention some of these words, which are translated as ‘having or making the sound of’ or ‘words that sounds like’ with no further analysis.

The onomatopoeic lexemes analyzed here were collected from spontaneous oral speech, mostly narratives or procedural texts produced by various Northern Amis speakers. These onomatopoeic words are an open class and are conventionally used with the same meaning by native Amis speakers. They are fully part of the lexicon as a distinct class of words used holophrastically or are followed by quotative verbs. Some of them can be derived as secondary onomatopoeic nouns or verbs with the same derivational morphology as other lexemes of the same class and are then used descriptively (see sections 3.2.1 and 3.2.2). Secondary onomatopoeia are still considered as onomatopoeic if they are flexibly used as sound depicting and sound describing lexemes.

Some phonosymbolism has been identified in Austronesian roots by Blust (1988: 57–58), who noted a high incidence of initial “k- or g- in morphemes that refer to rubbing, scratching,

¹ This research was supported by LACITO-CNRS and financed by Research Strand 3, “Typology and dynamics of linguistic systems,” of the Labex EFL (Empirical Foundations of Linguistics) (Investissements d’Avenir, ANR-10-LABX-0083/CGI), part of Paris University (ANR-18-IDEX-0001).

² Each voice-affixed verb selects a nominative subject based on thematic prominence and one of two alignment patterns: absolutive (with nominative *k-* and a core oblique argument marked by *t-*) or ergative (with nominative *k-* undergoer and a genitive agent marked by *n-*). The active voice *mi-* selects a nominative actor and absolutive alignment, and the undergoer voice selects a nominative undergoer and ergative alignment.

³ This is based on a corpus of oral productions and elicited information collected over a period of approximately fourteen months of fieldwork on the Amis language. I express my gratitude to the speakers for their collaboration.

scraping [...], and many initial /ŋ/ in words relating to the oral or nasal area”. Amis also has (i) a fair number of onomatopoeic words with the initial voiceless plosives /k, t, p/ that depict hitting, scratching, or scraping sounds, or the sound of thunder or guns, (ii) a fair number of initial /ŋ/ in words relating to the oral or nasal area, (iii) various onomatopoeic words with initial /b, c/ that tend to refer to softer sounds of water and air, and (iv) onomatopoeic words with initial /h/ that depict breathing or snoring, as well as words with initial /s/ that depict hissing sounds. However, since their phonosymbolic use is not statistically compelling, this question is not be pursued.

Some Formosan languages share similar onomatopoeic and ideophonic words with the same meaning: e.g., Amis *kungkung* ‘knock (a door, drum)’ and Seediq *kung* ‘sound of a door being knocked’; Amis *ʔuhʔuh* ‘sound of coughing, cough’ and Seediq *quh* ‘sound of coughing’; Amis *tuktuk* ‘hit with a hammer, beat a drum’, Kavalan *tuktuk* ‘knock’, and Seediq *-tuk* as a submorpheme of *tatuk* ‘knock’ (Lee 2017: 206). In Amis, *rasmus* means ‘drizzle’, and *ras* in Seediq depicts the sound of ‘flowing water’; in Amis, *telaq* depicts the ‘sound of a rifle shot’, and *tlelak* in Seediq depicts the ‘sound of a machine gun’; in Amis, *kelakelaq* refers to the ‘sound of a creaking wagon’, and in Seediq, *kerak* depicts the ‘sound of an old car being driven’.

A few bird names are also derived from their cry: compare Amis *tikulac*, Paiwan *cikurai* [tɛikúraj], and Seediq *kikulih* or *tkulih* [təkúʒih], all of which refer to the bamboo partridge (Lee 2017: 195). There are very few loans from Mandarin Chinese. One is the Amis war cry *saaa!* from Mandarin *shā* 杀 ‘attack, kill’, another is *peng* or *teng*⁴ for the sound of a banging door; another possible loan could be *t(e)ra~t(e)raq* ‘sound of rain dripping’ from Japanese *taratara* ‘trickling’.

3. Description of onomatopoeia

Onomatopoeic words in Amis are mono- or disyllabic. They may be repeated as prosodically distinct words, like *tak tak tak*, imitating the sound of a rifle gun or a clattering sound. Many are fully reduplicated CV(C) roots, counting as one prosodic word, like *ciwciw* depicting the sound made by chicks or ducklings.

3.1 Phonology

Northern Amis has seventeen consonants and four vowels; see Table 1.

3.1.1 Vowel and consonant inventory

Table 1 Consonants

	Labial	Dental	Alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Pharyngeal	Glottal
Stop	<i>p</i> /p/	<i>t</i> /t̚/			<i>k</i> /k/	<i>q</i> /ʔ/	‘ /ʔ ⁵
Affricate			<i>c</i> /ts/				
Fricative	<i>b</i> /β/	<i>d</i> /ð/	<i>s</i> /s/				<i>h</i> /h/
Nasal	<i>m</i> /m/	<i>n</i> /n̚/			<i>ng</i> /ŋ/		
Trill			<i>r</i> /r/				
Post-alveolar lateral			<i>l</i> /l̥/				
Approximant	<i>w</i> /w/			<i>y</i> /j/			

⁴ 𦉳 *pāng* and 𦉳 *tēng* or 𦉳𦉳 *tēntēng* ‘sound of a drum beat’ are also Chinese onomatopoeia.

⁵ The glottal stop is written as ‘ and the epiglottal stop /ʔ/ is written as *q*.

All consonants occur in all positions, with possible allophonic variations. Glottal stops are of two types, phonemic and rule-inserted, with only behavioral differences between them. Rule-inserted glottal stops are related to the phonetic constraint forbidding vowel-initial and vowel-final words. They also occur between identical vowels and between non-identical vowels, neither of which is high, like *ca'el* [tsaʔə] ‘necklace’. On the other hand, phonemic glottal stops occur between sequences of non-identical vowels containing /i, u/, and, in this position, contrast with the homorganic glide insertions /j, w/, like *tu'a* [tuʔáʔ] ‘shout’ and *tuwa* [tu.wáʔ] ‘then’ or *kumi'ut* ‘chayote shoot’ and *kuliyul* ‘rabbit’.

There are four vowels (/i, ə, a, u/) and no oral/nasal vowel contrast, as in other Formosan languages. Vowel length is not distinctive; lengthening is expressive and occurs in onomatopoeic words like *caas* [tsa::s] ‘sizzling sound’ or *wiii* [wi::] ‘sound of a gust of wind’. Expressive vowel length is also used in other contexts to express emphasis and focus (Bril and Skopeteas 2021: 75–76). Onomatopoeic words use all the consonants and vowels of the phonemic inventory of Amis and no unusual consonants or vowels. In very few cases, they only contain consonants, like *sss* ‘hissing sound’ (as from steam), but none only contain vowels.

3.1.2 Syllabic structure

Phonetically, all words must have a consonantal onset and coda, but word-internally, syllables can be open, as in *teraq* ‘sound of rain dripping’, or closed, as in *butbut* [βut.βút] ‘pull up weeds’. There are no complex onsets, nor complex codas, yet, in fast speech, the /ə/ in unstressed syllables may be dropped, resulting in complex onsets, as in the word *s(e)pat* [spat] ‘four’. These vowels are produced in careful speech. In CVC.CVC words like *ras.mas* ‘drizzle’, adjacent consonants belong to different syllables.

The great majority of lexical roots are disyllabic, with CV(C).CVC syllabic structure, like *su.paq* ‘saliva’ or *tam.daw* ‘person’; there are also trisyllables like *ta.nek.tek* ‘strong’, *ba.lam.bang* ‘chaos’, *bir.ca.ku* ‘leap’, and *tir.ba.kud* ‘jump high’.

Onomatopoeic words generally have the same syllabic structure as all other lexemes in Amis; they can be monosyllabic like *pang* depicting the sound of something falling, *wi* and *biw*, for the sound of wind, *pes* for the sound of wine spraying with the mouth⁶; or they can be disyllabic like *ciya* depicting the sound of cicadas.

Onomatopoeia can be repeated as distinct prosodic words, like *kir kir kir* depicting the sound of a bird or the sound of tearing cloth, *yi yi yi* for the sound of a squealing dog, *ʔo ʔo ʔo* for the sound of a rooster, *ciya ciya ciya* for the sound of cicadas, *kiya kiya kiya* for the sound of rain, *tita tita* for the sound of a clock, of horse steps or rain, *kulu kulu kulu* for the sound of something falling in the water or the sound of a gurgling belly.

Many other onomatopoeia are fully or partially reduplicated roots counting as one prosodic word; they can be fully reduplicated CV(C) roots giving rise to disyllabic words like *pungpung* ‘sound of knocking on a door’, *kungkung* depicting hollow sounds like the sound of drums, *teptep* for the sound of an engine partially; or they can be partially reduplicated roots, with partial CVCV~ reduplication, like *kelaq*, resulting in quadrisyllabic words such as *kela~kelaq* depicting a rattling sound.

Reduplication, full or partial, is a common process occurring at the left edge of all lexical roots, including onomatopoeia; on the other hand, words repeated as distinct prosodic words are the hallmark of onomatopoeia.

3.1.3 Stress

⁶ This is a form of wine libation offered to the gods.

The main stress is fixed and occurs on the last syllable of prosodic words, i.e., of fully inflected words (Bril 2016, Bril and Skopeteas 2021). Onomatopoeic words share these same properties.

3.1.4 Tone

Amis has no tones.

3.2 Morphology and syntax

Lexical roots in Amis are most generally categorially neutral; they are categorized as nouns or verbs when they are derived and inflected as morphosyntactic words (Bril 2017). The categorial flexibility of roots may extend to some onomatopoeic words when they are used as derived onomatopoeic verbs or nouns.

3.2.1 Word-formation

Onomatopoeic words generally occur in a sentence-initial position and are used either holophrastically like *pungpung* in (1) depicting the sound of knocking on a door, or as depictive direct speech acts followed by the quotative verb *sa* ‘say’, itself often marked by the perfective clitic =*tu*, as in (2) and (3). In (2), *ngang* depicts the sound of a sudden and loud scream or noise; in (3), *wi* or *biw* depicts the sound of strong wind gusts; and *ca::s* in (4) depicts a sizzling or hissing sound.

- (1) *Pungpung!* “*buhat-i k-u panan!*”
 ONOM open-IMP.LV NOM-NM door
 ‘ONOM ! “open the door !”.’
- (2) *Ngang sa=tu k-aku a tangic.*
 ONOM say=PFV NOM-1SG COMP <AV>cry
 ‘I burst into tears.’ (lit. ONOM I went crying) (Arikakay_Dawa.030)
- (3) *Wi sa=tu k-u baliyus.*
 ONOM say=PFV NOM-NM typhoon
 ‘Wuuuh went the typhoon.’ (U surit nu Pangcah.188)
- (4) *Ca::s” sa k-u dangah.*
 ONOM say NOM-NM cooking-pot
 ‘Ssss went the cooking-pot.’

3.2.2 Syntax

Some onomatopoeia are derived as nouns or verbs with the same morphological exponents as other nominal or verbal lexemes and are used descriptively. They still count as onomatopoeic if they are flexibly used to depict a sound and to describe it. If their sound component is bleached or lost, they are then lexicalized onomatopoeia.

Common nouns are marked by *u* which is inflected for case as *k-u* (nominative), *t-u* (oblique), or *n-u* (genitive). Verbs are derived by voice affixes, which are selected in accordance with the thematic role of the nominative argument, for instance, active voice *mi-* if the nominative argument is an actor, undergoer voice *ma-* if it is a patient. Derived onomatopoeic nouns or verbs behave similarly.

Derived onomatopoeic nouns refer to entities that produce a given sound, such as animals, objects, instruments and tools. For instance, *ciwciw* depicts the sound made by chicks or ducklings and extends to the animals themselves, *’ak’ak* in (5) depicts the croaking of ravens and extends to the raven.

- (5)a. *Ma-suni cira 'ak 'ak 'ak.*
 NAV-sound NOM.3SG ONOM
 'It made the sound 'ak 'ak 'ak.' (U mala-ʔakʔak-ay a wawa.025)
- b. *Mi-takaw t-u ka-ka'en-en k-u 'ak 'ak.*
 AV-steal OBL-NM Ca~eat-UV NOM-NM ONOM.raven
 'Ravens (lit. *ak'ak*) steal food'. (U mala-ʔakʔak-ay a wawa.044)

The onomatopoeic word *kung* and its reduplicated form *kungkung* depict a hollow, deep sound like the sound of a door, of drums, of big bells being struck (6a-b); *pungpung* in (6c) also depicts a banging sound on a door.

- (6)a. *Ku:ng sa k-iya suni n-iya kangkang.*
 ONOM.LENGT say NOM-DEIC sound GEN-DEIC big.bell
 'ONOM went the sound of that big bell.'
- b. *Kungkung sa k-u panan.*
 ONOM say NOM-NM door
 'ONOM went the door.'
- c. *pungpung! pungpung! pungpung! sa=tu.*
 ONOM ONOM ONOM say=PFV
 'ONOM ONOM ONOM it went.' (Tatakulaq atu Hungti.0058)

Tekaq, which depicts a clattering sound, can be used as a noun referring to the noise of footsteps (when walking in clogs, for instance). In (7), it occurs as a sound quoted by the form *sananay* in a phrase modifying *suni* 'sound'.

- (7) *Ma-tengil k-u [tekaq tekaq sa-(a)nanay a] suni n-u na-ripaq-an.*
 UV-hear NOM-NM ONOM ONOM say-MODF LNK sound GEN-NM NMZ-tread-LV
 'They heard the clack-clack sound of footsteps.' (Tatakulaq atu Hungti.064)

The onomatopoeia *'aw 'aw*, applied to human cries of pain or fear, is used depictively in (8a) and is derived as a verb by *mi-* in (8b), describing the action producing that sound. It coexists with the non-onomatopoeic verb *mi-libabui* 'bark'.

- (8)a. *'aw 'aw" sa=tu ci Mayaw.*
 ONOM say=PFV PN Mayaw
 'Woow woo" went Mayaw' (in pain).
- b. *Mi-'aw 'aw k-u wacu.*
 AV-ONOM NOM-NM dog
 'The dogs howled.' (Mikungling tu wacu.027)

3.3 Semantics

3.3.1 General

The most common onomatopoeic words found in my fieldwork corpus depict the sounds of water, wind, animals, and human sounds related to bodily functions ('cough', 'breathe'), motion and movement ('fall', 'noisy walking'), to actions ('strike'), speech and sounds produced by using tools and artefacts.

3.3.2 Semantic relations

Onomatopoeia lack antonymic relations; on the other hand, they may have synonymy with other onomatopoeic or non-onomatopoeic lexemes. They have some amount of polysemy, generally resulting from the metaphorical or comparative extension of sounds in close semantic relations.

For instance, *tak tak tak* depicts the sound of a rifle, of a machine gun or clattering sounds. *Kelaq* depicts rattling and breaking sounds, extended to the sound of wooden clogs; in its reduplicated form, *kela~kelaq* is used as a noun referring to a wooden cart that makes a rattling sound.

Some onomatopoeia make up sets of nearly synonymous words differing by vowel or consonant alternation; some mark intensity or pitch grades with slightly or no distinct meanings, like *pang*, *peng*, *pung* and *teng* ‘bang!’.⁷ The high back vowel /u/ denotes louder and deeper sounds, while the high front vowel /i/ denotes higher pitch or gentler sounds, like *kungkung* depicting a hollow knocking sound on a door, a drum and *kingking* depicting the sound of small bells. Other alternations include mid-front and low vowels like *teraq* ‘sound of water falling’, and mid-front and high front vowels like *teri~teriq* ‘(light) tapping sound’ (as on a door).

Secondary onomatopoeic words derived as verbs or nouns and used descriptively favour their semantic extension, even more so if the initial sound component is lost or extends to some visual experience. For instance, *teraq* which depicts a generally loud flow of liquid or clattering rain as in (9a), also extends to a visual experience, namely the flow of tears (in 9b-c),⁸ interestingly, though, it is followed by the quotative verb *sa*. *Teraq* also coexists with the non-onomatopoeic lexeme *l(e)saq* ‘leak, drip’ that has no sound depiction.

- (9) a. *Teraq, teraq sa k-u urad.*
 ONOM ONOM say NOM-NM rain
 ‘Drop, drop went the rain.’
- b. *Teraq, tera::aq sa ku lusaq n-ira a tangic.*
 ONOM ONOM:LENGT say NOM-NM tear GEN-3SG COMP <AV>cry
 ‘His tears dropped and dro::pped as he cried.’
- c. *Tera~tera::q sa k-u lusaq.*
 RDP~ONOM.LENGT say NOM-NM tear
 ‘His tears dropped and dro::pped.’ (Panganan.008, 10)

4. Conclusion

Onomatopoeic words are a small subset of the Amis vocabulary, and are commonly used to make a narrative more vivid, while non-onomatopoeic lexemes with a similar meaning will be used for descriptive purposes. The distinct property of onomatopoeia is their ability to be repeated as distinct prosodic words or to be reduplicated, while other lexemes can only be reduplicated. Onomatopoeia have no distinct phonological properties. Primary onomatopoeia may also be used synchronically as secondary onomatopoeia, i.e., as derived verbs or nouns, with a retained sound component. When their onomatopoeic properties fade, these words are integrated into the common lexical stock with further semantic drift, and host similar derivational and inflectional patterns, subsequently behaving like other lexical roots with similar functions, e.g., with predicative, argument, and modifying functions.

List of abbreviations

AV active voice; CA- Ca-reduplication; CAUS causative; COMP complementizer; DEIC deictic marker; EP epenthetic; EXCL exclusive; EXS existential; FUT future; GEN genitive; HORT hortative; INCL inclusive; LENGT lengthening; LNK linker; LOC locative; LV locative voice; MODF modifier; NAV non-actor voice; NEG negation; NFIN non-finite; NOM nominative; NM noun marker; NMZ

⁷ Similar synonymy occurs in the English words *clanging*, *clanking*, and *clunking*.

⁸ The character is afflicted by constant crying.

nominalizer; OBL oblique; ONOM onomatopoeia; PM personal marker; PFV perfective; RDP reduplication; STAT stative; UV undergoer voice.

Appendix

SOUND TYPES		ONOMATOPOEIA	MEANING	
NATURAL SOUNDS	WATER	saang	sound of heavy rain, clatter of rain	
		kiya kiya	sound of heavy rain	
		kriskris	rustling sound of rain	
		bwabwa	sound of bubbles	
		kom	sound of waves on rocks	
		tia tia tia	sound of running water	
		kulu kulu	sound of sthg falling in the water, of bubbling water	
	AIR	wi, wiiii	sound of wind	
		biw	sound of wind	
		taaa	sound of arrow shooting	
		kele~keleng	thunder clap	
	EARTH	bengbeng	sound of pelting stones	
		kriskris	rustle of leaves	
	FIRE	ca:s	sizzling sound	
		tela~telaq	sound of fire-cracker	
	ANIMALS	MAMMALS	?aw ?aw	sound of dog barking, howling
			yi yi yi	sound of dog squealing
			wooo	sound of dog howling
			hong	sound of bear
			mee	sound of goat
BIRDS		miao	sound of cat	
		?ak ?ak	croak of raven	
		ciwciw	sound of chicks	
		cik cik cik	sound of chicks	
		ka ka ka	sound of hen laying egg	
		ki ki ki	sound of some birds	
		ku ku ku	sound of owl or pigeon cooing	
		?o ?o ?o	sound of rooster	
		kwak kwak	sound of water bird	
?ap ?ap		sound of duck		
pi pi pi		sound of ducklings		
REPTILES AND AMPHIBIANS		kir kir kir	sound of small frog, and some birds	
		?op ?op	sound of big frog	
INSECTS		ciya ciya	sound of cricket, cicada	
		seng seng	sound of insects	
FISH AND SEA CREATURES				
HUMAN	VOICE	ngang	sudden and strong noise produced by a human bursting into tears, screaming	
		tata tata	blabla, sound of speech	
	BODY	kep kep kep	sound of steps	
		hiwhiw	sound of breathlessness, hissing breath	
		kulu kulu	sound of sthg falling in water or of gurgling belly	
		pes	sound of wine spraying with the mouth	
A P	MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS	kungkung	sound of slit-drum	

	kingking	sound of bells
VEHICLES	teptep	noise of a boat engine
MECHANICAL AND ELECTRONIC EQUIPMENT AND DEVICES	tuktuk	sound of hitting (as with hammer)
	teki~tekiq	sound of hitting with tool
INSTRUMENTS OF WAR AND DESTRUCTION	tak tak tak	sound of rifle or machine-gun
BELLS, GONGS AND OTHER SIGNALING EQUIPMENT	tita tita	sound of watches (of rain, horse steps)
	kung	sound of big bell

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