In this chapter I explore sound as a cross-cultural construct and as a medium for defining one’s alignments with the nonhuman environment. A fundamental premise is that people frame their interactions with the nonhuman world just as they frame their alignments with other humans. Whereas interactional analyses of discourse have taken as their main subject people interacting with other people, I assume a perspective that allows that human discourse also comments on one’s alignments with the nonhuman world. The term alignment is intended in the spirit of Erving Goffman’s term footing (1981), which he uses to describe a framework for interaction, such as boss-employee or teacher-student. Through their language, Quechua-speaking Runa living in the upper Amazonian region of Ecuador articulate a sonically driven disposition that I call a sound alignment. By way of background, their traditional way of life combines subsistence-based swidden horticulture with fishing, hunting, and gathering of wild fruits and nuts. As their territories become increasingly enmeshed in the global economy, they are becoming more dependent on commodity goods and on opportunities for engaging in wage labor.

Of central concern for my argument is Runa’s production of utterances called ideophones. Ideophones are a class of expression that is integral to a culturally sensitive performance style. Runa communicate by imitating a variety of subjective impressions spanning a range of sensory domains. Ideophones are functionally specialized for expressivity that is often attributed to sound symbolism (Nuckolls 1999). I consider them here as a type of cultural discourse. My claim is that they provide Runa with a linguistic medium for modeling and constructing
nonlinguistic natural processes. Runa model natural processes with sound by imitating the resonant, rhythmic properties of experiential phenomena: ongoingness in time, distribution in space, instantaneousness, disruption, rearrangement, and completion. I want to claim, further, that in the act of constructing natural processes with ideophonic sound, Runa are at the same time foregrounding their shared animacy with such processes. I refer to this stance as a sound alignment because it is evident through performative utterances featuring imitative sound.

I articulate the concept of sound alignment by outlining the underlying assumptions about language and nature that are congenial with it. I do this by contrasting two models of language and nature, one of which is congenial with linguists’ mainstream understandings of language and the other of which is more appropriate for Runa’s understandings of language in relation to the nonhuman life-world. I then present data that clarify and support the concept of sound alignment through examples of affective, imitative sound and performative, ideophonic sound. The polysemiotic nature of ideophonic expression is explored because it provides a source of evidence for Runa alignments with the world by means of sound. The chapter concludes with a description of ongoing changes in Runa’s use of ideophones. Ideophone use becomes increasingly restricted as young Runa become active participants in political debates and market-economy activities. Yet there is visual evidence for the continued vigor of the sound alignment concept among Runa.

Finally, the study of ideophones points to an ambitious research program that would investigate how the death of a word class can be linked to cultural ideologies of sound. There is an urgent need for investigating why ideophones continue to be a robust class of expression in some linguistic and cultural traditions but not in others. Material conditions such as literacy, market-economy activities, and urbanism can go only so far as explanations. The expression of these material conditions within a culture’s religious and philosophical constructions of nature and the world is of critical importance as well. Aspects of Judeo-Christian constructions of humans in relation to their environment may constrain the development of a sound alignment and thereby inhibit a linguistic culture’s use of ideophones. Animistic belief complexes, by contrast, provide the most congenial climate for the sonically driven disposition that I outline here.

Idiophones are a class of expression found in most language families throughout the world. Onomatopoeic expressions such as wuf wuf, ka-ching, and thwack are a subtype of ideophone found even in languages
such as English that are said to be ideophonically impoverished. Although ideophones are functionally restricted in mainstream middle-class American culture, they are a significant form of expression, constituting a culturally sensitive performance style in a number of linguistic traditions. Daniel Kunene (2001: 190), writing about Southern Sotho, a Bantu language, says the following about ideophones' performativity:

The ideophone stands aloof from the connecting tissues, the sinews, and ligaments that flesh out the basic components of speech into a morphological, grammatical, and syntactic system. By thus isolating itself, it, so to speak, climbs the stage to become an act, thus removing itself from the ordinary run-of-the-mill narrative surrounding it. By its very nature, it imposes on the subject the function of an actor or performer whose surrogate is the narrator. The closest analogy is that of an oral narrative performer who from time to time “becomes” the characters he/she is narrating about and acts out their parts.

Through ideophones' performativity, speakers enact their alignments with the world by means of sound. In saying that ideophones enact a sound alignment, I do not claim that they are uniquely responsible for perpetuating the alignment, which is part of a deeply ramifying set of dispositions that are transmitted imperceptibly in the enculturation of individuals. To explain what this sound alignment is, it is necessary first to explain what it is not. There is in the culture of linguistic science a hidden cosmology that views language as an expression of universal ideal forms originating in the mind and having no motivated correspondence with nature or the world. This cosmology is evident in axiomatic principles of linguistic science such as that of the arbitrariness of the sign. It trickles into everyday awareness through aphorisms such as “talk is cheap” and “actions speak louder than words.” It is congenial with cultural principles that we in the United States embrace, such as the First Amendment guarantee of freedom of speech, a freedom that entails a view of language as a tool for reasoned, rational discourse. These interrelated assumptions about language are congenial with a view of ourselves as autonomous individuals inhabiting a stochastic universe of partly understood forces and energies. Language is a tool for symbolizing our world but is distinct from that world and thus relatively unaligned with respect to it. For convenience, I refer to this set of interrelated assumptions about language as the “talk is cheap” perspective.
When catastrophic events take place, however, another language cosmology emerges from the background and asserts itself. According to this second cosmology, language is intimately connected with the greater social order and disorder. This view of language is evident in attempts to regulate and legislate language usage, attempts that bespeak a view of language as dangerous and disruptive. Recent examples of this second perspective arose as a result of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001. With the United States in a heightened state of vulnerability, freedom of speech was often willingly suspended. A well-worn cliche about language from the naval world resurfaced in the words of the U.S. secretary of defense, who put off a journalist’s question as he quipped, “Loose lips sink ships.” Criticisms of the president and his administration were withheld or at least muted. The major network news organizations voluntarily restrained themselves from broadcasting videotapes made by terrorists because of their potential to incite more attacks. For convenience, I refer to this second set of interrelated assumptions about language as the “loose lips” perspective.

The sound alignment that I outline here is related to the loose lips perspective, though distinctive in a number of respects. Runa do not view language as intimately related to the world only during volatile social episodes. They make constant use of their language to express an attitude of alignment with nature. In traditional Runa culture this is their unmarked perspective. Let us turn to a couple of examples taken from my early fieldwork in 1987. In this context I was doing a lot of basic information-gathering, particularly of Quechua terminology. The following exchanges illustrate one of the ways in which Runa express their alignments with the nonhuman life-world. A group of Runa women who had gathered to visit were trying to coax a woman named Jacinta into singing for my tape recorder. She resisted their proddings, and to distract attention from herself, she picked up my dictionary, which contained simple line drawings, and identified those she recognized. She pointed to the drawing of what was labeled a star sloth. Wanting to test the dictionary’s accuracy, I asked her, “Is this a star sloth?” She replied by pronouncing the name of the sloth in an intonational profile of affective recognition. Her affective intonation occurs in line 5 below:4

Example 1
1. Nuckolls: Is this an *estrella indillama* (i.e., a star sloth)?
3. Faviola: Is that an *estrella indíllama*? (she’s asking).
4. Nuckolls: This one.
5. Jacinta: Oh! An *indíllama*! (i.e., a sloth) (affectively)
6. Nuckolls: (So it’s just an ordinary) *indíllama*.
7. Jacinta: Yes, Look!

What I am calling affective intonation is a prosodic pattern that accents a word’s melodic contour with a higher and then a lower pitch. In this example the higher pitch occurs on the first two syllables. The contour can be diagrammed in the following way:

```
In-di-
lla-
ma
```

The set of exchanges constituting example 2 contains an even clearer example of an affective recognition intonation. In these utterances there are two contrastive pronunciations by Jacinta. In line 3 she asks Ana María if the image she sees is that of a large rodent called *lomocha*. In this utterance she uses an affectless, neutral pronunciation, which is appropriate given that she is referring to it. After confirming with Ana María that the image is of what she thought, she uses an intonation of affective recognition when she repeats its name in line 5 as if she is hugging a long-lost friend or relative.5

Example 2
2. Ana María: Yes, I see.
3. Jacinta: Is this a *lomocha*? (i.e., large rodent)
4. Ana María: Yes.
5. Jacinta: It’s a *lomocha*! (affectively)
6. Nuckolls: Is that a *lomocha*?
7. Jacinta: Yes! Look at that *lomocha* and notice its little beard there.
8. Nuckolls: Ah ha.

The affectivity of Jacinta’s pronunciation of the word for rodent is the result of a higher-pitched first syllable followed by two lower-pitched penultimate and final syllables:

```
Lo-
mo-cha
```
With intonational sound, Jacinta expresses an alignment of affective recognition with two nonhuman life-forms. These affect displays are indistinguishable in their intonational profiles from what we would typically reserve for another person. The difference is that whereas we would use such profiles to express a bond of common familiarity or common humanity, Runa use them to express a sentiment of common animateness that foregrounds their sharing of a similar life force. It is a sentiment that has some kinship with the view of the Greek philosopher Thales, expounded by R. G. Collingwood (1976: 31), of the world as a living organism that is ensouled.

Going beyond alignments expressed with intonational sound, Runa alignments with the nonhuman life-world can be detected in the content of what people say. One of my main consultants, Luisa Cadena, enjoyed recounting extremely short anecdotes from her personal experiences that served to characterize the behavior of nonhuman life-forms. Two of these vignettes are presented in what follows. Both feature ideophonic performances of imitative sound that foreground a mode of thought marked by special terminology in English. Runa anthropomorphize nonhuman forms of life by attributing human characteristics to them. They also engage in anthropopathism when they attribute human feelings and sentiments to nonhuman life-forms. Such thought modes are often facilitated with the help of ideophones. When I asked Luisa to free-associate about the verb *kantana*, “to sing,” her first thought was to describe the way a toucan sings sadly when it cannot find water gathered in the flowers that grow in the moss clinging to trees: 6

**Example 3**

Wanting to drink flower water, if there isn’t any,
He cries, singing so sadly if there is no water.
He goes *kiyaow kang kang kiyaow kang kang*,
Checking each green place, onto each branch he goes,
jump jump jump jump jump.
He sings at each branch, at each tree branch,
And after he’s sung, he goes off sadly.

Another bird, the *wakamaya*, is said to sing sadly upon the death of his wife: 7

**Example 4**

The wakamaya goes *garaamm garaamm garaang garaang*.
Crying he goes, feeling sad that his wife has been killed.
The wakamaya is such a feeler of sadness.
The existence in English of terms such as anthropomorphism and anthropopathism imposes a critical framework upon a mode of thought that Runa engage in freely and unselfconsciously, with no worries about oversentimentalization. The ideophonic representation of these birds’ sounds, invested as they are with emotional motivation, serves as a vehicle for connecting and aligning with the birds.

A good deal of the affective alignment generated by the foregoing examples is derived from their contextual frames. In example 3, the toucan is sad because it cannot find water. In example 4, the wakamaya’s sadness is attributed to the loss of its mate. The ideophones representing their cries add another dimension to the pathos that is reinforced by the intonational qualities of the speaker’s voice. I want to make the point that, aside from intonation and contextual framing, ideophones all by themselves create alignment between a speaker and the world. Ideophones do not simply refer to, point to, or reinforce the social milieu. Speakers use ideophones to simulate it. If ideophones can be said to refer at all, it is a very different kind of reference that is effected by a speaker’s imitation of what is felt to be naturally salient. When a speaker chooses a facet of experience to imitate, that facet becomes a construction of what is regarded as naturally apparent. Speakers engaging in an ideophonic performance become agents immersed in the process, event, or action they are bringing about with sound. Christa Kilian-Hatz (2001: 155) states that ideophones collapse the difference between the “extra-linguistic event level and the speech level” and adopts the term Referenzverschiebung, or reference shift, to describe this phenomenon. Speakers can at times become so involved in their performance that they allow the ideophone to substitute for an entire predication. Example 5 describes how a big tree crashes down in a storm. Although this utterance does contain the finite verb “goes and falls,” the speaker could have omitted the verb without any loss of clarity.  

Example 5

gyaung
bluuuuuu
puhunng!
urma-gri-n
(creaking sound) (breaking off) (impact with ground) fall-TRSLC-3

This example illustrates how a speaker can become immersed in a natural process that is brought about by sound. The tree’s falling is modeled with linguistic sounds representing the salient properties of creaking, rupturing, and falling with impact, particularly through their contrast between vocalic sounds, which allow a continuous airstream through the vocal tract, and consonantal sounds, which restrict the airflow. The performative extension of vocalic sounds in gyauung imitates
the prolongation of the creaking sound. The force of the tree's breaking off from its base is symbolized by the aspiration of *bilhu*. The lack of consonantal obstruction in this ideophone's word-final position simulates the unrestricted falling of the tree trunk toward the ground. Finally, the restriction of the airstream with the word-final velar nasal *-ng* in the second syllable of *putung* imitates the idea of contact and impact with the ground. The speaker's drawing out of these final sounds simulates the reverberative qualities of the sound of impact.

When Ideophones Express What Would Never Be “Put into Words”

Quechua speakers' use of ideophones is linked with a cosmology that sonically defines their alignments with the nonhuman world. In the foregoing discussion I have explained how, through their use of imitative sound, ideophones contribute to this attitude of alignment, even though they are not solely responsible for expressing and perpetuating it. I now discuss some of the interesting implications for the idea of alignment that arise out of ideophones' polysemiotic status. Ideophones may be considered iconic as long as we remember that images are not always visual. Paul Friedrich, in his theory of tropes (1991), outlines five tropic devices or figures that may be understood as universal schematic designs for all poetic language. The image is one of five master tropes and is defined broadly enough to include single words, extended descriptions, and even whole poems, such as William Carlos Williams's “The Red Wheelbarrow.” The essence of the image trope is that it communicates ideas of firstness and of primary perceptions and qualities, no matter what their sensory modality. A train whistle, the smell of tar, and qualities of feelings that are particularly acute are all examples of image tropes.

As image tropes, ideophones communicate sound images of sounds, as in the onomatopoetic description of the two birds in examples 3 and 4 or of the tree crashing to the ground in example 5. Ideophones may also make use of the intensities and rhythms of linguistic sound to communicate events, actions, and processes, many of which are only peripherally tied to sound making. Subsequent examples will reveal the wide range of ideophones' multisensorial imagery. Their synesthetic qualities make them amenable to analysis from a number of perspectives. I have argued (Nuckolls 1999, 2001) that ideophones may be usefully considered hybrid forms combining properties from what are traditionally circumscribed as verbal and gestural domains. My argument,
based on the fact that ideophones tend to be highly foregrounded through intonational elaboration, gains support from the work of Dwight Bolinger (1986). His position is that intonation is part of language’s gestural complex, and that gestural expression occurs along a continuum, manifested in rudimentary form by the up and down movements in voice pitch that grade into actual physical movements of the hand and body.

Further support for ideophones’ links with gesture can be found in the videotaped experiments conducted by Kita Sotaro (1997), who discovered that speakers of Japanese used hand and arm gestures along with their ideophones in a large percentage of cases. The Quechua language provides syntactic evidence for ideophones’ gestural status. There are many examples of ideophones in verb-adverb constructions in which the ideophone simply restates the meaning of its verb. Such seemingly redundant collocations make sense if we consider the ideophone to be semiotically rather than semantically distinctive. An example will help to clarify this point. The ideophone illung is repeated in example 6 to describe the repetitive gesture of a jaguar’s licking itself. Here the ideophone simply restates the meaning of its verb, which suggests that it is communicating in a different semiotic mode from that of its verb. The verb “to lick” refers to the action, and the ideophone gestures that action with sound:10

Example 6
Licking his whole body illung illung illung he sits there calmly.

Ideophones, then, may function as sound images of sound or sound images of relatively soundless gestures, forces, and visual phenomena. Ideophones’ functions have even been compared to visual techniques used by film artists, such as juxtaposition, close-up shots, and wide-angle shots (Nuckolls 1995). As if to reinforce the imagic status of ideophones, Quechua speakers engaging in ideophonic performances often preface them with imperative statements to “Look!” or “Look here!” One interesting consequence of ideophones’ hybrid semiotic status is that in Quechua at least, they shoulder a great deal of communicative responsibility. Ideophones’ functions encompass what in technologically complex societies would be allocated to visual modes of expression. For example, many Quechua ideophones map perceptual schemas that have analog representations in visual media such as film or television. There are ideophones for the pouring of liquids, the sprinkling and scattering of particles of matter, for cutting, for chopping,
and for dozens of other schemas that can easily be viewed in short television commercials designed to communicate with succinct imagery.

There are also ideophones for images that, to use the conduit metaphor discussed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980), would never be “put into words.” Runa use ideophonic sound to describe graphically violent, traumatic, or sexual events that would constitute sensational visual imagery in our own culture. One consequence of taking such images out of our mouths and communicating their power with visuals is that we achieve a certain distance from them. We can choose not to look at them, because the burden of perception has been shifted onto a recording device. Runa leading traditional subsistence-based lives have not had such an option. They must slaughter animals for food. They are at times directly confronted with tragic and violent events. Yet they do not seem compelled to turn their gaze from the pulsating, the dismembered, or the otherwise exposed. The tendency for people living in our own society to view such phenomena with revulsion or queasiness reflects, in part, the distance we feel between ourselves and any reminders of our own mortality. This is why we have a term such as “gawking,” which implies that certain images should not be viewed. The prolific film artist Stan Brakhage, who sees his work as motivated by fundamental questions about birth and death, has written eloquently about his attempts to come to terms with images from coroners’ autopsies, doctors’ surgical procedures, and the victims of violent crimes investigated by police in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania:

Actually I was driven, for my own desperate reasons, to go down that Sunday morning, early, and suddenly walk into a room where there are several murder victims, some suicides, people who died by violent accident; I walked into this room where the day before I had only photographed . . . and everywhere I turned . . . suddenly I was surrounded by . . . slaughter! And so I just began photographing desperately. I really overshot because I was so desperate to keep always the camera going; every moment I stopped photographing I really felt like I might faint, or burst into tears, or come apart, or something like that. (Brakhage 1982: 195)

Runa perceive phenomena that make us uncomfortable not as voyeuristic gawkers. Their ability to view what we would be inclined to turn away from reflects their particular moral view of perception. They approach even the most violent images with just enough equanimity to be able to talk about them. Describing and sharing such perceptions
with others takes away, I believe, some of the power of their horror, making the most traumatic events somewhat less unmanageable. Ideophones are prominent in such descriptions because they rivet our attention onto the details that we are most likely to want to bleach from our consciousness. In this way they contribute to another kind of alignment with the world. It is an alignment based on the belief that nothing is too awful to be excluded from one’s field of perception or world of discourse. To adequately grasp these points, it will, unfortunately, be necessary to confront the reader with excerpts from narratives that relate horrific happenings. I focus on two events: an airplane crash and a suicide. Both are related from Luisa Cadena’s perspective, which is based on her detailed discussions with others as well as her witnessing of the aftermath of both events.

A Plane Crash

This story recounts a particularly agonizing tragedy. Small military planes fly in and out of the base in Montalvo, a forty-minute walk from the village of Puka yaku, several times a day. Because there are no roads leading into Montalvo or Puka yaku, Runa are accustomed to hitching rides on these planes, usually paying only a nominal fee and often riding free all the way to the bustling town of Puyo, about thirty minutes away on a small prop plane. Luisa was working in her garden when she noticed a small military cargo plane flying very low, its tail almost touching the ground. She learned later that it had been seriously overloaded with cargo, including tanks of gasoline that exploded when the plane crash-landed into a stand of palm trees. Four passengers and one pilot were on board. Two passengers immediately jumped out and eventually recovered from their burns and injuries. Another jumped out but landed in deep, swampy mud and could not free himself without help, which did not arrive before he became severely burned. He died shortly afterward. Another man died in the plane from burns. The pilot died at the controls, so severely burned that it was only by the remaining bits of his flight jacket that he was positively identified.

Some of Luisa’s accounts rely upon reports from others. She also managed to see quite a bit herself. The difference between what she herself experienced and what someone else saw and reported back to her is marked by evidential suffixes, a detailed discussion of which is found in Nuckolls 1993. For the purposes of my argument I regard the reports of secondhand witnesses as strengthening my overall point about the tendency for Runa to talk about images to which we would
never give voice. The verbalization of such descriptions cannot be attributed to some personal quirk of Luisa's. It is obvious that Runa go over and discuss these images among themselves in excruciating detail. Her account emphasizes a number of details about the burned bodies. One man's death receives many angst-filled details; he was Luisa's kumpagri, a term designating a ritual co-parent relationship. His final wishes that his watch be given to his wife and that his children be educated are recounted. The agonizing fact that he kept asking for water but was not given any, so that he would die more quickly and suffer less, is also told. She describes how this man's shirt was removed, his burned skin sticking to the shirt in little pieces. She uses the ideophone lōk, which describes a peeling away—for example, the way bark peels off of a tree—and also tāi, which describes how his skin stuck tightly to his shirt:11

Example 7
Well, they washed him and removed his burned shirt and his skin just remained on that shirt lōk; it got caught on that shirt lōk tāi, tightly, like this, now all of his flesh remained on that shirt in bits and bits and bits.

Finally, using the ideophone tśidzin, she describes how the man's body became stiff and drawn up after he died:12

Example 8
Then my kumpagri Oستavo had become just drawn together tśidzin from burning.

The pilot's fate is given considerable descriptive detail as well. His body is said to have been turned into pitch by the heat. A fragment of his yellow jacket is the only piece of his clothing left. One of his shoes is found at the crash site with his foot still inside it. Luisa uses several ideophones to describe the complete severing of his foot from its leg. The ideophone pullung describes something with a stubby or stumplike appearance. The ideophone chyu describes a complete severing. The ideophone mutyun is synonymous with chyu:13

Example 9
Then his fingers had burned off, now all of them. His feet also had burned off pullung. His shoes had been scattered way over there, as the ones gathering [at the crash site] hadn't gathered things well. Now inside of
one of those shoes, his entire foot was there. Now it had burned off chu, cutting itself off like that. Burning off nutyun, it remained inside the shoe.

**A Suicide**

The next story concerns a soldier’s suicide with his own rifle. Luisa and her husband were present at a military outpost in Chiriboga when it happened. Her husband was an acquaintance of this man, who came to visit them early one morning to tell them that the woman he had planned to marry had thrown her rings at him and broken off the engagement. The man sobbed and suddenly got up to go, saying, “Adios,” which implies a permanent departure. A short time later they heard a rifle go off and immediately went to look. Luisa describes what she saw in relentless detail. Apparently the man had shot himself in the head. Because he was still alive when they arrived, his body was trembling and he gasped quick short breaths, which are described with repetitions of the ideophone ling. Repetitions of ti describe the trembling and shaking of his body.

**Example 10**

Now the man [was going] ling ling ling ting ting ting ting ting ling ling: he was actually still alive.

Luisa then explains that parts of his brain tissue had become scattered all over, using the sound image ta:

**Example 11**

As for his brain tissue, it was [splattered] ta ta, just scattered all over.

The final descriptive detail she presents has to do with the man’s blood. She describes it as flowing out like water from a faucet, using tsala:

**Example 12**

And his blood, well, how like some kind of an animal it [bled] from this, from this wound! Like water flowing out, look! That’s how it went, just tsalaladalalalala, like water gushing out it flowed.

It is clear from these examples that Runa are willing to confront awful moments with the full power of their perceptual abilities, which are put into focus through ideophonic sounds. In doing so, they take it upon themselves to experience in a direct way what we try to relegate
to controlled contexts in which playback mechanisms simulate recorded awfulnesses for us. We submit to such perceptions usually by our own choice, in the anonymous darkness of public spaces or in our own homes, where we can regulate the imagery with a remote control button. Runa do not share our perceptual taboos. They talk of things that we would not even allow ourselves to see because their world of discourse encompasses their wide-ranging alignments, enacted through sound, with the diverse animate processes they feel themselves to be part of.

**Sound Alignments in Myth**

I turn now to examples of ideophonic sound use in myths. Runa have a large corpus of myths called *kallari timpu*, or “beginning times” myths, that concern themes of analogy, similarity, and the interrelatedness of all entities, whether earthly or celestial. Prominent in these stories are cycles of transformation from one life-form to another. In this section I offer excerpts that feature sound alignments being constructed by Runa in mythic texts. Each excerpt illustrates a pivotal moment in the text when a human becomes nonhuman, and each transformative moment features an ideophonic representation that constructs the transformed being into a ratified, natural token of its type. By their performative simulation of these transformations, Runa forge a link between the human and the nonhuman.

*The Sound of Becoming a Dolphin*

The first excerpt is taken from the story of a hawk who helps little children. The *bullukuku* hawk notices that two orphans are being cruelly starved by their guardians. The bird helps the children by coming at night and pecking out the guardians’ eyes, to punish them for their cruelty. When the guardians wake up and discover what has happened to them, they decide to become freshwater dolphins, called *bugyu*. The *bugyu’s* sound emblems are *bhux*, which describes its forceful bursting out of water, and *kar*, which describes its arc-like path of movement through the air. Because the freshwater dolphin can breathe only out of the water, it frequently emerges from below the surface with a dramatic burst.

Example 13

So then they stood there just listening with only their ears.

And then just a little bit later there was a *bhuxuu karrrrrr*.
And then more of them bhuuaa buu buu went and emerged. There! They've become bugu! “They are breathing like them,” the others say.

Another jumps in tuphu, and another tuphu, and another tuphu!

One burst out here bhuua, there bhuua, here bhuua, there bhuuu bhuuu buuu buuu!

All of the Runa became bugu!

The Sound of Becoming a Boa Constrictor

The next excerpt describes a boy’s transformation into a mythical boa constrictor with a giant head (in some versions, two conjoined heads), called the kwung kwung boa. The story begins when two brothers on a distant hunting trek discover that all the meat they had been trying to dry has been stolen from their drying rack. The older brother stays back the following day to wait and watch for the thief, who turns out to be a large boa. He and his younger brother then make plans to smoke the boa out of its tree with the noxious fumes of burning dried chili peppers. After smoking it out and killing it, they discover its nest of eggs, which smell good enough to eat—“just like turtle eggs,” according to the younger brother. Although his older brother advises him not to, the younger brother insists on trying the boa eggs. He then becomes consumed by an unquenchable thirst, which he tries to satisfy by drinking an entire pond. He then warns his older brother that he is about to burst apart and turn into a boa. The naturalness of the younger brother’s transformation into the kwung kwung boa is verified by the kwung kwung sounds he makes.20

Example 14

He exploded, sounding like a rifle.

And with that there was kwung kwung kwung kwung kwung kwung kwung kwung kwung kwung kwung kwung kwung kwung kwung kwung kwung kwung kwung kwung kwung kwung kwung kwung kwung kwung.

Like frogs those little kwung kwung boas called out.

The myth fragments just presented supply a particular kind of evidence for the sound alignment underlying Runa’s views of their relationship with nonhuman life-forms. The mythic transformations are confirmed as accomplished through sonic performances of ideophonic utterances. In the case of the kwung kwung boa, the sound also functions as the characterizing name for that nonhuman life-form. Such sound emblems assert, in effect, that the soundings of the kwung kwung boa are its most characterizing—that is, “natural”—feature. The
freshwater dolphin’s name, bugyu, is at least a partial sound emblem of the sound bhu, which this animal alone makes as it bursts out of water.

**Sound Alignments in Cultural and Political Contexts**

Through their use of imitative sound, Runa construct, model, and align themselves with natural forces and processes. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of the wider implications of Runa sound alignments in a social and political climate of great flux. The discussion is framed as an inquiry into the diminishing use of ideophones, especially by young, politically active and economically ambitious Runa. Comparative evidence for ideophone usage in Asian and African linguistic traditions suggests that any hypothesis accounting for diminished use must include a complex configuration of factors. These factors also help explain the restricted status of ideophone use by adults in English-speaking, middle-class, mainstream society. The decisive factors, I argue, may be the constraining power of religious and philosophical constructions of humans in relation to their environment. Specifically, I believe that sonic dispositions that give rise to exuberant use of ideophones emerge in cultures that legitimate animistic forms of thought.\(^\text{21}\)

**Two Local Cultures Compared**

At present, Ecuador’s indigenous people are experiencing tremendous social upheaval. They are considerably more active in national-level politics than they have ever been in the past. A member of the Indigenous Peoples’ Confederation was actually a participant in the military junta that attempted to overthrow the country’s president in January 2000. A few indigenous people have been elected to the country’s national congress. These positive kinds of changes are not without their consequences, however. When indigenous people become active in national politics, they must become comfortable with Spanish if their voices are to be heard. The habitual use of Spanish by Runa affects their ways of speaking Quechua. Ideophones become increasingly restricted as Runa become more active participants in political debates and in market-economy activities. They are restricted insofar as they are seldom used, and when they are used, they undergo much less intonational elaboration.

Two villages supply an instructive contrast that sheds light on the matter of ideophones’ status in changing Runa society. The village of Puka yaku, where I did most of my fieldwork, is located on the Bobonaza
River about a thirty-minute walk from the military base Montalvo. The people of Puka yaku rely on their traditional subsistence techniques, such as swidden horticulture, hunting, fishing, and gathering. They are also opportunistic wage laborers, working for the military personnel nearby or else for geophysical companies doing exploratory seismic testing for oil. In general, Puka yakuans are reluctant to become involved in national-level dialogues and political organizations. Yet it would be wrong to consider them insular or isolated people. They travel frequently by plane to Puyo and allow relatively free access to outsiders wanting to visit or work there. In Puka yaku, ideophones are used with unrestricted abandon, and most Puka yakuans, although able to understand some Spanish, are far more comfortable speaking Quechua.

The village of Sara yaku, located farther upstream from Puka yaku on the Bobonaza River, is a hub for politically active Runa because it is the headquarters for the Organización de Pueblos Indígenas de Pastaza, or OPIP. I never attempted to visit Sara yaku because OPIP had already denied me access to another village under its control, called Canelos. I was, however, acquainted with numerous Sara yakuans and worked with a man from that place for a year in the United States. In addition to their political activism, which intersects all levels of Ecuadorian life, from the local to the national, OPIP officials are also internationally active insofar as they solicit and receive funds from a variety of nongovernmental organizations for development projects. In general, Sara yakuans are very protective of their land and allow neither oil companies nor anthropologists unauthorized visits.

When the leaders of Sara yaku organized a 240-kilometer march from the lowlands to the capital city, Quito, in April 1992, one of their goals was to acquire legal titles to two million hectares of continuous rainforest territory (Sawyer 1997). Although the march gained national and even international attention, it was not entirely successful. Suzanne Sawyer reports that the Borja administration granted only about 55 percent of the land request. Furthermore, the government carved up the territory into apparently arbitrary geometric blocks having no relevance to actual patterns of land use or to historical or mythological understandings of place (Sawyer 1997). The government's inadequate response to indigenous demands is symptomatic of a greater problem underlying Sara yakuans' debates over land use. Simmering below the surface of these debates are conceptions of natural resources that cannot possibly be reconciled. The Ecuadorian government has a rational, marketplace view of its resources as commodities for the generation of capital. As I have been attempting to show through analysis of their
language, traditional Runa's culture constructs an affective relationship based on a sentiment of shared animacy with their land.

When Sara yakuans become active in political arenas of power, however, their use of Spanish and the cultural dispositions underlying Spanish linguistic culture rule out the expression of sound alignments with ideophones. The importance of the sound alignment concept and the sentiment of common animacy is that, even when they are repressed in political discourse by social and cultural factors, they are given expression in alternative form. Visual evidence for the sentiment of common animacy expressed through a sound alignment is found in a political poster created by two Sara yaku men and reproduced in Nuckolls 1996: 130, depicting an autochthonous man, his feet rooted in the earth, his mouth wide open, screaming, hands gripping weapons, all of which is echoed by the anger of the surrounding environment. The sun blazes a bright red heat, and volcanoes erupt with red lava in the distance. This poster provides a visual analogue to my claim that sound alignments are linked to a sentiment of shared animacy. The man exists as an organism that is distinguishable from his surroundings yet definitively rooted to them. The surrounding earth is also like an organism insofar as it expresses an affective state. The man's anger is expressed sonically, through a visual depiction of screaming.

**Concluding Remarks**

Underlying the use of ideophones by Runa is a complex of cultural constructions that link sound to sentiments of shared animacy with the nonhuman life-world. Such linkages would explain the diminution of ideophone usage under circumstances requiring cognitive reframings of human and nonhuman interrelations, as occurs when a traditional subsistence-based culture becomes increasingly dependent on market-economy activities. Interesting comparative evidence comes from G. Tucker Childs (1996), who conducted a sociolinguistic survey of attitudes toward ideophone usage among Zulu speakers in South Africa. Childs found that ideophones were disappearing among young urban Zulu speakers. His study suggests the intriguing possibility that the disappearance of ideophones might point to the loss of a language's vitality and ultimately to its demise.

Urbanism and participation in a market economy do not by themselves cause a decline in ideophone use. What is absolutely crucial is comparative data on ideophones in Asian cultures, particularly those in which ideophones exist in abundance. Japanese speakers in highly
urbanized environments use ideophones quite freely. Their use has been characterized as essential to Japanese linguistic culture (Gomi 1989). The abundance of ideophones in Japan, I propose, is related to the fact that traditional Japanese culture has not been permeated by Judeo-Christian views of nature as degraded and antagonistic to humans. There is an emphasis in Japanese religions, especially Shintoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, upon human alignments with nature. This emphasis is evident in literary traditions such as haiku poetry and extended prose such as novels, and in many genres of visual art. Robert Hass (1994: 255) has suggested that certain forms of aesthetic stylization in haiku poetry reflect “traces of an earlier animism.” Hass’s description of the style of the poet Issa (1763–1827) is particularly revealing for our purposes because it is said to include “lots of onomatopoeia and direct address to animals (1994: 147). The writings of the seventeenth-century poet Basho, translated by Hass, also attest to human alignments with nature. Basho urges his students to “make the universe your companion . . . and enjoy the falling blossoms and scattering leaves” (Hass 1994: 233). In another passage he states: “Every form of sentient existence—plants, stones, or utensils—has its individual feelings similar to those of men” (1994: 237).

The linguistic culture of Quechua-speaking Runa privileges the use of ideophones. Through ideophones, Runa enact a sentiment of shared animateness that aligns them with the nonhuman life-world. Sound is the perfect medium for the expression of this alignment because sound is possible only when there is movement, and movement of any kind is the prototypical criterion for animateness. Although it is certain that ideophones are becoming functionally restricted among young, politically active Runa, it is not yet clear why this should happen. Research on ideophone use among young urban Zulu speakers in South Africa finds parallel tendencies, causing Childs (1996: 83) to conclude that their diminished use signals a desire to shed one’s traditional identity. The continued vigor of ideophones as a word class in Japan, however, and probably in a number of other Asian linguistic traditions as well, points to the necessity of investigating the cultural ideologies of sound that nurture or constrain them.

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Notes

1. Ideophones exist in many languages and language families of Africa (see Voeltz and Killian-Hatz 2001, especially the Introduction). They are also found in Asian and South Asian languages, including Dravidian, Indo-Aryan, Korean, Vietnamese, and Japanese. Reports of ideophones in Indigenous languages of South America also exist, and evidence is accumulating on ideophones in Aboriginal Australian languages.

2. Wuf wuf is a child language ideophone, considered onomatopoetic of a dog’s barking. Ka-ching is a whimsical ideophone for the sound of an old-fashioned cash register, in current use by adults to communicate ideas of large expense or of cashing in on something big. Tilwack is an action-figure Ideophone used in comics to describe forceful impact.

3. The term mainstream is intended in the spirit of Heath (1983: 391–392), who defines it as a way of life that exists all over the world and involves reliance on formal education, aspirations for upward mobility, and a perspective that seeks behavioral models outside one’s family and community.

4. All translations are by the author from Quechua. Data are cited according to their tape number and page numbers from the author’s transcript file. The reader is strongly encouraged to go to the Web site www.allia.org and select from the Pastaza Quechua entry entitled “sloth’s name pronounced affectively” to listen to the actual pronunciation of the Quechua word for sloth, indiliana.

5. The pronunciation of lomocha is also available at www.allia.org under the entry “affective recognition of a rodent.”


9. In saying that ideophones are image tropes, I do not exclude the possibility that their image-tropic properties may be enlisted for other poetic effects. Noss’s
analysis of Gbaya ideophones (2001: 268–269) points to their intertextuality, which links an ideophone in a familiar folktale with similar events from peoples' own experiences. Given their formulacidity, the artfulness of ideophone usage often involves manipulating listeners' expectations with unexpected hyperbole, irony, or metaphor.

10. Tape IA, Transcript File, p. 28, “Becoming a shaman.”
12. Tape IIIb, Transcript File, p. 168.
13. Ibid.
14. The ideophone líng describes the insertion of one thing into another. Here its meaning has been extended to describe the quick short inhalations of the dying man. I am indebted to Sergio Gualinga for explaining this particular sense of líng to me. See Nuckolis 1996 for a detailed discussion of the semantics of líng.
15. Tape IIIb, Transcript File, p. 170.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. I do not wish to suggest that Runa have no perceptual taboos whatsoever. I noticed that people did express revulsion when experiencing certain olfactory sensations. Any hint of the smell of human excrement often triggered exaggerated retching, along with spitting of one's own saliva, as well as commentary about how nauseated it made one feel.
19. Tape IIIa, Transcript File, p. 111.
20. Tape XIVb, Transcript File, p. 178.
22. There is, of course much more to be said about the factors contributing to the functional restrictedness of ideophones in mainstream Western culture. Collingwood (1976) traces the history of concepts of nature from Greek and Renaissance to modern conceptions. The Renaissance view of nature as brute substance for the fashioning of mechanisms is obviously antithetical to the development of a sentiment of shared animacy. The emphasis in modern philosophy upon the mind as a rational entity, distinct from the world of matter, may also be relevant in this regard.