

Mimetic Words in Japanese and English.

“What’s in a name? that which we call a rose
by any other name would smell as sweet.”
Shakespeare: *Romeo and Juliet* Act 2 Scene 2.

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Due in large part to the influence of Ferdinand de Saussure, the relationship between the sounds which words are made up of and the meanings of the words has been taken by many linguists today to be arbitrary. Saussure (1857 ~ 1913) is often described as the father of linguistics and his ‘Course in General Linguistics’ is arguably the most influential linguistic text ever published. Simply stated, he thought that language was a system of signs and that a sign has two parts: (a) ‘the signifier’ i.e. the sound pattern and (b) ‘the thing signified’ i.e. the concept. He emphasized the arbitrary nature of language signs i.e. that there is no connection between the two parts of the sign. That is to say, there is nothing in the sounds which make up the word ‘dog’ for example which explains why we use this word to refer to the animal which is man’s best friend rather than to a table or anything else. Whilst recognizing the existence of mimetic words i.e. words whose sound appears to relate to what they refer to, Saussure dismissed these as unimportant exceptions. There is no point in denying that, for many words, the connection between their form and meaning is arbitrary. In what follows, though, I plan to look at the exceptions to Saussure’s principle of the arbitrariness of language and consider whether these words are indeed simply uninteresting fringe phenomena. The exceptions to Saussure’s principle may be divided

into (a) onomatopoeia and (b) words containing phonesthemes. Onomatopoeia refers to the direct imitation of a sound in the outside world such as 'cockadoodledoo', 'bang', 'zoom'. Such onomatopoeia sometimes also refer to the source of the sound as with 'cuckoo', 'kazoo'. Phonesthemes are individual sounds or sound clusters which suggest particular meanings in a given language. Thus '-ng' in 'ding', 'bong', 'clang' is suggestive of metallic reverberation. Apart from suggesting sounds, phonesthemes may suggest something unrelated to the auditory sense. For example some phonesthemes suggest movement e.g. '-le' in 'waggle', 'wobble' & 'wriggle' suggests uncertain movement, others suggest size e.g. 'i' in 'itsy-bitsy', 'little' & 'mini-bus' suggests diminutiveness. Some suggest light e.g. 'gl-' in 'glare', 'glint' & 'glow', while others suggest emotional evaluations e.g. 'sn-' in 'snarl', 'sneer' & 'snide' suggests unpleasantness. This process of one sense, sound, being stimulated by another sense e.g. vision, touch etc. is known as synaesthesia. However, even with onomatopoeia, there is not a complete resemblance between the word and the corresponding sound in the outside world, as for example an object has to a photograph taken of it and even these words differ, to some extent, between languages. For example the English word 'cuckoo' is '*coucou*' in French, '*cuclillo*' in Spanish, '*cuculo*' in Italian, '*cucu*' in Romanian, '*kuckuck*' in German, '*kokkyx*' in Greek, '*kukushka*' in Russian, '*kakuk*' in Hungarian, '*kaki*' in Finnish and '*kakkô*' in Japanese. Not only do onomatopoeia differ to some extent between languages but they may even differ somewhat between dialects of the same language. Izumi points out that, according to where you are in Japan, people might say a cow goes '*mô-mô*', '*môn-môn*', '*mê-mê*', '*û-û*', '*nbô-nbô*' or '*nbû-nbû*'. In spite of the similarities between these words, they are clearly far from identical. One reason for this is that human and animal vocal organs differ, each having their own limitations and so it is impossible for humans to copy such sounds

perfectly. The fact that the sound of an animal or the sound that a human makes in imitating that animal cannot be transcribed using traditional writing systems is, I suppose, another reason why onomatopoeia differ between languages and dialects. Finally, another reason for the difference in onomatopoeia between different languages is that each language has its own sound system with different possible sound combinations and different restrictions. In what follows, I will be talking mainly about phonesthemes. My aim is to look at the distinctive characteristics of mimetic words in Japanese and English as well as the meanings associated with individual sounds and sound clusters in mimetic words in both languages in order to discover whether mimetic words in Japanese have anything in common with those in English.

The Japanese language is rich in mimetic words. One problem for people learning Japanese as a foreign language, though, is that as these words are not used in formal contexts and therefore have a lower status, so to speak, and also because there are a large number of them (Asano's Dictionary lists around 1,600) many are never included in ordinary dictionaries. They are classified under three different categories (a) phonomimes (*giongo* or *giseigo*) (b) phenomimes (*gitaigo*) and (c) psychomimes (*gijôgo*). Phonomimes imitate all kinds of sounds: animals, insects, water, machines etc. e.g. '*nyâ-nyâ*' (miaow); '*karan-koron*' (the sound of a bell). Phenomimes describe states, conditions or manners, that is, unlike phenomena in the first category they are ascertained through senses other than that of hearing. e.g. '*noro-noro*' (slowly) or '*koso-koso*' (stealthily). Psychomimes express psychological states and sensations e.g. '*sugo-sugo*' (dejectedly) or '*piri-piri*' (tingling pain). McClain points out that some mimetic words can be used both as phonomimes and as phenomimes e.g. '*don-don*' (boom boom) [a phonomime] and '*don-don*' (rapidly) [a phenomime] and Ono gives the example of '*musha-*

musha' which can mean 'the sound of munching' [a phonomime], 'the action of chewing' [a phonomime] and 'to get irritated' [a psychomime]. (Perhaps this should not surprise us as there are a large number of homonyms in Japanese.) The abundance of mimetic words in Japanese is related to the semantic under-differentiation of Japanese verbs. That is to say, for example, where English has a variety of verbs to describe different ways of walking, Japanese uses a single verb '*aruku*' (to walk) to which it affixes these mimetic words as adverbs. There are around seventy of these words which are used with '*aruku*', among which are:-

- '*buru-buru (-to) aruku*' (to stroll).
- '*choko-choko (-to) aruku*' (to toddle).
- '*dara-dara (-to) aruku*' (to walk at a snail's pace).
- '*doshin-doshin (-to) aruku*' (to stomp).
- '*kotsu-kotsu (-to) aruku*' (to plod along).
- '*noso-noso (-to) aruku*' (to walk sluggishly).
- '*pata-pata (-to) aruku*' (to walk pitter-patter).
- '*saku-saku (-to) aruku*' (to walk with a crunching sound e.g. in snow).
- '*sassa (-to) aruku*' (to walk briskly).
- '*teku-teku (-to) aruku*' (to trudge).
- '*uro-uro (-to) aruku*' (to loiter).
- '*yobo-yobo (-to) aruku*' (to totter).
- '*yochi-yochi (-to) aruku*' (to toddle).
- '*yoro-yoro (-to) aruku*' (to stagger).

One verb combines with more mimetic adverbs than any other verb and that is '*suru*' (to do). Apart from modifying verbs, mimetic adverbs also sometimes modify adjectives e.g. '*poka-poka (-to) atatakai*' (comfortably warm). The particle '*to*' or '*te*' is normally used to mark a quotation but when used with mimetic adverbs literally means 'with the sound of' or 'in the

manner of'. The use of *'to'* or *'te'* is optional with some of these adverbs and obligatory with others. Apart from mimetic adverbs there are also mimetic nominal adjectives e.g. *'gara-gara no densha'* (empty train). These nominal adjectives together with mimetic adverbs, which are more numerous, make up the largest category of sound symbolic words in Japanese. There are also the following kinds of mimetic words:–

Nouns: *'shabu-shabu'* ('a Japanese stew'–from the sound made by stirring the ingredients).

Compound nouns: *'koso-doro'* ('sneak thief'– from *'koso-koso'* [slyly] and *'dorobo'* [thief]).

Compound verbs: *'chon-giru'* ('to snip' – from *'chon'* [sudden, brief movement] and *'kiru'* [cut]).

Compound adjectives: *'hyoro-nagai'* ('lanky' – from *'hyoro-hyoro'* [weak, tall, thin] and *'nagai'* [long]).

Compound nominal adjectives: *'maru-potcha da'* ('[the woman / child] is plump' – from *'potcha-potcha'* [cutely plump] and *'marui'* [round]).

Verbs formed by attaching a mimetic word to the following suffixes:

(a) *'-tsuku'* (to exhibit the feature of) e.g. *'paratsuku'* ('to rain lightly' – from *'para-para'* [the sound of small droplets striking something]).

(b) *'-meku'* (to elegantly exhibit the mild feature of) e.g. *'tokimeku'* ('[a heart] beats fast' – from *'doki-doki'* [the sound of the heart rate increasing]).

(c) *'-keru'* [intransitive suffix] or *'-kasu'* [transitive suffix] (to turn into) e.g. *'torokeru'* ('melt' – from *'toro-toro'* [a smooth viscous liquid brought about by melting something]).

(d) *'-eru'* (to do the action) or *'-asu'* (to cause someone to do) e.g. *'yureru'* ('shake or sway' – from *'yura-yura'* [sway gently]).

(e) *'-ku'* or *'-gu'* (to do the action) e.g. *'sawagu'* ('to make a noise' – from *'zawa-zawa'* [the sound of many people's voices]).

(f) *'-maru'* [intransitive suffix] or *'-meru'* [transitive suffix] or *'-mu'* [intransitive and transitive suffix] (to become) e.g. *'gishimu'* ('grate, squeak' – from *'gishi-gishi'* [rubbing or creaking sound]).

(g) *'-baru'* [intransitive suffix] *'-bu'* [transitive suffix] (to become) e.g. *'kutabaru'* ('be fagged out' – from *'kuta-kuta'* [be exhausted]).

Hamano discovered that mimetic adverbs can be divided into two main types:

(a) those based on CV roots and (b) those based on CVCV roots (C = consonant, V = vowel). Possible adverbs based on CV roots are as follows:– *piQ*; *pii*; *piiQ*; *pin*; *piin*; *pi-pin*; *paQ*; *paQ-pa*; *pa-paQ*; *guu*; *gui*; *poi*. (Q = a long consonant sound = a geminate = a syllable-final moraic obstruent, [written in *kana* script with a small character with the sound *tsu*]; *'-n'* = a syllable-final moraic nasal). Possible adverbs based on CVCV roots are as follows:– *pakaQ*; *paka-pakaQ*; *paka-pakan*; *paQkan*; *pakuQ*; *dokan*; *deren*; *zuru-zuruQ*; *gatari*; *funwari*.

According to Herlofsky's study of more than 900 Japanese mimetic words, 97% of them had at least one of the following four characteristics: (1) a syllable-final moraic nasal *'-n'* (2) a *'ri'* sound (3) a long consonant sound (4) reduplication. Izumi's list of characteristics of mimetic words is the same as Herlofsky's but with the addition of (5) a long vowel sound (6) reduplication involving partial change of sound (7) the contrast between voiced and voiceless sounds. (1) A syllable-final moraic nasal can produce the following kind of variations:– *'gacha-gacha'* (clattering) → *'gachan-gachan'* (jangling); *'gacha-gachan'* (rattling); *'gachan'* (a single clinking sound); *'gachân'* ('a single clinking sound' – the emphatic form of *'gachan'*). Herlofsky mentions the association of this sound with the idea of the gradual fading away of a sound or action. Izumi too mentions that the *'n'* sound suggests 'resonance' or 'a lingering tone'. Hamano also states that the *'n'* sound represents reverberation and may indicate the involvement of a flexible object. (2) The addition of a

'ri' sound can produce the following kind of variations:- '*koro-koro*' (continuous rolling action) → '*korori-korori*' (rolling action, slower than '*koro-koro*' and with a slight pause between each roll); '*korori*' (single, slowish rolling action); '*kororin*' (gradual cessation of rolling). Izumi mentions that the 'ri' sound often suggests softness, smoothness and slowness. According to Hamano this sound is suggestive of a quiet ending. Herlofsky thinks that the sound is associated with closeness or completeness but when it is followed by an 'n' sound it is associated with smallness e.g. small metallic sounds. (3) A long consonant sound can produce the following kind of variations:- '*kuru-kuru*' (rotation) → '*kuru-kurutt*' (fast rotation); '*kurutt-kurutt*' (rotating movement with a short pause after each rotation); '*kurutt*' (a single revolution). According to Izumi, the long consonant sound represents momentariness and speed. Herlofsky also thinks that this sound suggests instantaneity when it appears at the end of a word, but when it appears in the middle of a word it intensifies the word's meaning. Hamano mentions that this sound indicates force and vigour in an action and suggests the inflexibility of the object involved. Shibatani believes that the long consonant sound suggests the sudden stopping of an action or quickness or the single occurrence of an action. (4) Reduplication can bring about the following kinds of variations:- '*don*' (a single boom) → '*don-don*' (boom boom); '*don-don-don*' & '*don-don-don-don*' (the same meaning as '*don-don*' but with the frequency of repetition emphasized). Herlofsky says that reduplication is associated with repetition or continuation of sounds and actions or an increase in their intensity. (5) Long vowel sounds can produce the following kinds of variations:- '*ton-ton*' (knocking) → '*tôn-ton*' or '*ton-tôn*' or '*tôn-tôn*' (a knocking sound which resounds longer than '*ton-ton*'). Izumi points out that the long vowel sound expresses the fact that sounds are long or that actions or situations take a long time or are continuing. Hamano thinks that the long vowel sound suggests

that an action is longer and more strenuous. (6) Reduplication involving partial change of sound can bring about the following:– ‘*gasa-goso*’ (rustling); ‘*shidoro-modoro*’ (flustered). Izumi notes that in such cases, ‘*a*’ frequently changes to ‘*o*’. (7) The contrast between voiced and voiceless sounds can be seen in the following:– ‘*shittori*’ (damp); ‘*jittori*’ (damp with a sense of dirtiness e.g. with sweat). Izumi points out that voiced sounds are heavy and voiceless sounds are light. Heavy, dull, loud sounds therefore tend to be represented by the former and vice-versa. Izumi also mentions that voiced sounds tend to have negative connotations e.g. ‘dirt’ in the above example of ‘*jittori*’. Hamano notes that the voiceless obstruents ‘*p*’, ‘*t*’, ‘*s*’ & ‘*k*’ are associated with the same meanings as their voiced counterparts ‘*b*’, ‘*d*’, ‘*z*’ & ‘*g*’. The difference between them is that the former group refer to light, small, fine, thin things whereas the latter group refer to heavy, large, coarse, thick things. Shibatani points out that not only are voiced sounds associated with heavy, loud sounds but also with strong, big, rough actions or states whereas voiceless sounds are associated with lighter, softer sounds or delicate actions or states. Apart from the aforementioned characteristics associated with mimetic words, there is another which is mentioned by Vance: lack of sequential voicing (*rendaku*). Sequential voicing refers to the phenomenon whereby when two words are combined in Japanese to make a non-mimetic word, the word-initial consonant of the second word becomes voiced. Thus ‘*hito*’ (person) becomes ‘*hito-bito*’ (people) when duplicated. However in mimetic words, such sequential voicing does not occur e.g. ‘*hiso-hiso*’ (whispering). Finally, Hamano gives one further characteristic of mimetic words. Within the Japanese vocabulary, apart from loan words, only mimetic words begin with ‘*p*’. What is more, more mimetic words begin with ‘*p*’ than with any other sound.

Among Izumi, Herlofsky, Hamano, it is Hamano who gives the most detailed account of the meanings associated with individual sounds in mimetic

words. A summary follows of what Hamano discovered about the meanings associated with individual consonants and vowels appearing in mimetic adverbs based on CV and CVCV roots. (1) = What the consonant in CV roots is suggestive of. (2) = What the initial consonant (C1) in C1V1C2V2 roots is suggestive of. (3) = What the second consonant (C2) in C1V1C2V2 roots is suggestive of. Vowels basically suggest the same things regardless of position. (4) = Meanings associated with individual consonants and vowels proposed by other scholars. For ease of reference, I have also given the meanings associated with the syllable-final moraic nasal '-n' below.

a (low central vowel).

Affecting a large area: '*patt*' (scatter outwards; spread widely).

Standing out: '*patto shinai*' (unspectacular; dull).

(4) Large, slow. (Ono). Low, loud sounds and actions with large objects. (Shibatani).

e

(1) Vulgarity: '*gê-gê*' (sound of vomiting).

(4) Vulgarity (Makino): Distastefulness (Ono). Smallness (Herlofsky).

h

(1) Breath: '*hûtt*' (puff, sigh).

(2) Weakness / softness / unreliability / indecisiveness: '*hura-hura*' (waver weakly).

Indeterminateness: '*hera-hera*' (talk meaninglessly).

(3) Breath: '*gohon-gohon*' (loud fit of coughing).

(4) Wetness, tenseness, movement. (Herlofsky).

i (high front vowel)

High pitch: '*kii-kii*' (screeching).

(4) Smallness, quickness (Ono). Smallness (Herlofsky). High, soft sounds and actions with small objects. (Shibatani).

k (Voiceless velar stop is associated with the same meanings as the voiced velar stop g)

(1) Contact with hard solid surface: '*katt*' (sound of one hard object hitting another).

Intensity: '*kyutt*' (sound or action of strongly squeezing or pressing).

ki Shrill sound: '*kii-kii*' (high-pitched voice).

ko & ku Deep hollow cave or velar sound: '*kon-kon*' (light coughing).

(2) Hard solid surface: '*kari-kari*' (sound of biting a hard object).

Firmness / Rigidity: '*kichitt*' (strict adherence).

Laughter: '*kusu-kusu*' (titter).

(3) Inward / Outward movement:

Opening: '*pokatt*' (gape).

Breaking: '*poki-poki*' (snap).

Surfacing: '*pikutt*' (bob).

Emission: '*toku-toku*' (sound of liquid coming out of a bottle).

(4) Hardness, sharpness, separation, sudden change. (Makino). Hardness. (Herlofsky).

m

(1) Suppression: '*mutt*' (sullen).

(2) Confusion: '*mago-mago suru*' (be in a flurry).

Murkiness: '*moya-moya*' (misty, foggy).

Irrational feeling / Uneasiness: '*mura-mura*' (feel an irresistible temptation to...).

(3) There are few mimetic adverbs having '*m*' as the second syllable.

(4) Tactile, warm, soft. (Makino). Softness, laxness. (Herlofsky).

n

- (1) Suppression: ‘*nitt*’ (to smile smugly).
 Vagueness: ‘*nutl*’ (loom).
- (2) Viscosity:
 Sliminess: ‘*nuru-nuru*’ (slippery, slimy).
 Stickiness: ‘*neba-neba*’ (sticky).
 Sluggishness: ‘*noso-noso*’ (languid).
 Smiling: ‘*niya-niya*’ (smirk).
- (3) Bending / Elasticity: ‘*shinnari*’ (flexible and soft).
 Lack of force / Unreliability: ‘*hena-hena*’ (feebly; in despair).
- (4) Tactile, warm, soft (Makino). Softness, laxness (Herlofsky).

-n (syllable-final moraic nasal).

Reverberation / Elasticity ‘*chin*’ (sound of a small bell).

 ‘*garan*’ (clanging).

- (4) Resonance (Herlofsky & Izumi).

o

Affecting a small area / Affecting something partially: ‘*pon*’ (tapping).

 Inconspicuousness: ‘*pott*’ (inconspicuously).

- (4) Something negative concerning human psychology (Makino).

 Largeness, slowness (Ono). Largeness (Herlofsky).

p (voiceless bilabial stop is associated with the same meanings as the voiced bilabial stop *b*)

- (1) An abrupt, instantaneous, explosive movement or event involving a tensely stretched surface e.g. a drum: ‘*pan-pan*’ (hitting something with a flat object).

 Tension: ‘*pun*’ (pout).

- (2) Breakable, tense surfaces e.g. water, skin, thread: ‘*buyo-buyo*’ (swollen).

- (3) Breaking / Explosion: *'supon'* (with a pop).
Submergence: *'zubu-zubu'* (become stuck in snow, mud).
Decisiveness: *'suppari'* (once and for all).
Freshness: *'sappari'* (refreshing).
- (4) Explosiveness, crispness, strength, suddenness (Makino). Roundness, tenseness (Herlofsky).

r

(1 & 2) Few mimetic adverbs have 'r' as the first syllable.

- (3) Rolling: *'porori'* (roll down).
Fluid movement: *'tsururi'* (slippery).

(4) Fluidity, smoothness, slipperiness (Makino).

s (voiceless alveolar fricative is associated with the same meanings as the voiced alveolar fricative z)

(1) Smooth movement / Absence of obstruction: *'satt'* (quick, adroit movement). {cf. *'patt'* (instantaneous movement)}.

Continuous movement or noise: *'zâ-zâ'* (large volume of water flowing noisily).

(2) Granules: *'sara-sara'* (sound of thin dry objects brushing together).

Non-viscous body of liquid: *'sara-sara'* (trickling; rippling).

Smoothness: *'sorori-sorori'* (extremely quiet, slow movement).

Quietness / calmness: *'suya-suya'* (to sleep peacefully).

Invigoration: *'sukatt'* (refreshed).

Without psychological entanglement: *'sarari'* (without resentment).

(3) Light contact with friction: *'gishi-gishi'* (creaking).

(4) 's' = quiet, quick. 'sh' = a quiet emotion (Makino). Wetness, tenseness, movement (Herlofsky).

t (voiceless alveolar stop is associated with the same meanings as the voiced alveolar stop d)

(1) Tapping a surface not tensely stretched as in p:

'*ton-ton*' (lightly striking something wooden or the hands or feet).

(2) Flowing liquid / Contained body of liquid: '*tara-tara*' (dripping).

Non-tense soft surfaces: '*choko-choko*' (toddling).

Sleepiness: '*torott*' (sleepy).

Dim / Subdued: '*chira-chira*' (weak light flickering).

(3) Hitting: '*patan*' (slam).

Make close contact with: '*pittari*' (firmly; tight).

Complete agreement: '*pitatt*' (suits the occasion perfectly).

(4) Hardness (Herlofsky).

u

(1) Small round opening e.g. nose or mouth:

'*putt*' (puff of air passing through closed lips).

(4) Human physiology or psychology (Makino). Largeness (Herlofsky).

w

(1) Human or animal noises / Emotional upheaval: '*wai-wai*' (rowdily; uproariously).

(2) Same as (1): '*waku-waku*' (excited).

(3) Softness / Faintness / Haziness: '*fuwa-fuwa*' (soft; fluffy).

y

(2) Leisurely motion: '*yukkuri*' (slowly).

Unreliable movement: '*yochi-yochi*' (toddle).

Swinging motion: '*yura-yura*' (sway).

(3) Childishness: '*hiyo-hiyo*' (twittering of baby birds).

Haziness: '*moya-moya*' (blurred; hazy).

Heterogeneity: '*uyo-uyo*' (squirming mass of living things).

(4) Weakness, slowness, softness (Makino).

-y- (palatalized consonants)

Childish or unfocused movement: *'pyoko-pyoko'* (hopping).

Instability / Unreliability: *'hyoro-hyoro'* (unsteadily).

Excessive energy / Noisiness: *'pecha-pecha'* (chattering).

Inelegance: *'chara-chara'* (flashy).

(4) Movement (Herlofsky).

Unlike Japanese, English does not have a large number of wholly mimetic words so the data I will analyze will (a) not be confined to a particular lexical category as Hamano has been able to do with her analysis of mimetic adverbs and (b) consist of both wholly mimetic words e.g. 'pop' as well as words containing only a single phonestheme (i.e. an individual sound or sound cluster which is mimetic) e.g. 'glamour' which contains the phonestheme 'gl'.

English mimetic words can be adjectives e.g. 'slippery', nouns e.g. 'flash', verbs e.g. 'rustle', adverbs e.g. 'gloomily'. Like Japanese, some English mimetic words are reduplicatives e.g. 'hee-hee', 'tut-tut', 'chuff-chuff'. There is also reduplication involving partial changes of sound in English. As in Japanese, this sometimes involves the substitution of a different consonant, producing the rhyming sounds 'roly-poly', 'higgledy-piggledy', 'namby-pamby', 'hodge-podge', 'teeny-weeny', 'boogie-woogie' and sometimes it involves the substitution of a different vowel e.g. 'clip-clop', 'tick-tock', 'pitter-patter', 'ding-dong', 'dilly-dally', 'wishy-washy'. If you recall, it was noted that in these cases, in Japanese, 'a' frequently changes to 'o'. In English though, 'i' (as in 'fit') usually changes to 'a' (as in 'bat') or to 'o' (as in 'dog'). Furthermore, these re-duplicatives are occasionally subject to a variation involving the addition of an extra syllable e.g. 'clinkety-clink', 'ding-a-ling', 'clippety-clop'. As in Japanese it is also possible to lengthen vowels in some English words e.g. 'lo-o-o-

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ong', 'a-a-a-ages', 'bo-o-o-o-oring' and, as in Japanese this lengthening gives emphasis to the meaning. However whereas the above examples are thought of as simply the words 'long', 'ages' & 'boring' enunciated slowly and not as separate words in their own right, in Japanese '*ton-ton*' and '*tôn-tôn*' are treated as different words.

In English mimetic words, phonesthemes occurring at the beginning of a word may consist of (a) a consonant C [see 'b-' below] or (b) two consonants CC [see 'gl-' below] or (c) three consonants CCC [see 'str-' below]. Phonesthemes occurring at the end of a word may consist of (a) a consonant C [see '-m' below]. (b) a vowel + a consonant VC [see short vowel + '-p' below] or (c) a vowel + two consonants VCC [see '-ash' below] or (d) a vowel + three consonants VCCC [see '-umble' below].

A summary follows of the meanings of some English phonesthemes i.e. meanings associated with some individual sounds or sound clusters in English. The data comes from Crystal, Reay, Rhodes, and Wescott.

-a- (low back vowel)

Largeness: vast; large. (Wescott).

-ash (See also -sh).

Violent impact resulting in extended decay of sound: bash; clash; crash;
dash; lash; smash; splash; thrash. (Reay & Rhodes).

b-

Abrupt, loud onset: boom; bang; beep; bellow; boing. (Rhodes).

-b (preceded by a short vowel)

Largeness or lack of shape or direction: blab; blob; dab; flab; glob; gob;
grub; jab; lob; mob; rub; slab; slob; stab; tub. (Crystal).

-ck

Short sudden sound: clack; click; cluck crack; smack; tick; whack. (Reay).

cl-

Clinging: clam; clamp; clasp; cleave; cling; clot; cloy. (Reay).

Abrupt onset: clank; click; clip-clop. (Rhodes).

d-

Stupidity: daft; dense; dim; dithery; dizzy; dopey; dotty; dozey; drippy; dud;
duff; dull; dumb; dunce; dupe. (Reay).

dr-

Liquid: drain; drink; drip; drizzle; drop. (Rhodes).

-ee- / -ea- (high front vowel)

Diminutiveness: wee; teeny; pee. (Wescott).

High pitch: peep; beep; creak; squeak; tweet; screech. (Rhodes).

gl-

Brightness: glamour; glare; glaze; gleam; glimmer; glint; glisten; glitter;
glossy; glow. (Crystal).

h-

Release of air through mouth: huff; huh; ha-ha; hee-hee; ho-ho.

-i- (high front vowel)

Diminutiveness: chip; diminutive; itsy-bitsy; little; mini-bus;
piddle; pipsqueak; pittance; slit; titch; whisper. (Wescott, Reay).

High pitch: clink; jingle; click. (Rhodes).

-l

Roundness: barrel; curl; furl; gnarl; pearl; roll; spiral; swirl; twirl;
whirl. (Crystal).

-le (preceded by a short vowel and single consonant).

Uncertain or repeated movement: cuddle; dabble; diddle; doodle;
dribble; fiddle; gobble; juggle; muddle; nibble; piddle; rustle; shuffle; snaffle;
sniffle; snuffle; snuggle; squiggle; tipple; toddle; topple; trickle; twiddle; waggle;
wiggle; wobble; wriggle. (Crystal).

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Lack of size, structure or importance: babble; bubble; gabble; giggle; pebble; piddle; piffle; puddle; rabble; rubble; stubble; waffle. (Crystal).

-m

Slow muffled decay: boom; wham; blam. (Rhodes).

-ng

Reverberation (i.e. sound which lasts): bang; bong; clang; ding; dong; gong; ping; ring; sing; twang. (Reay).

Lingering (i.e. something which lasts): cling; hang; pang; pong; tang. (Reay).

-nt

Shortness: blunt; dent; grunt; pant; runt; stunt. (Crystal).

p-

Abrupt onset: pop; ping; peep. (Rhodes).

-p (preceded by a short vowel)

Suddenness or shortness: blip; bop; chop; clap; clip; dip; drip; flap; flip; flop; gap; hop; lop; nap; nip; pip; pop; plop; quip; rap; rip; skip; slap; slip; snap; snip; stop; tap; trap; trip; whip; yap; zap; zip. (Crystal).

-rl

Roundness: curl; furl; gnarl; pearl; swirl; twirl; whirl. (Crystal).

sc- / sk-

Light movement: scamper; scarper; scoot; scramble; scud; scurry; scuttle; skedaddle; skid; skip; skim. (Reay).

-sh (See also -ash).

Swift or strong movement: bash; brush; clash; crash; crush; dash; flash; gnash; gush; lash; mash; push; rush; smash; splash; swish; thrash; whoosh. (Crystal).

sl-

Downward movement, direction or position: slack; slalom; slant; slash;

slice; slide; slip; slither; slope; slouch; slump. (Crystal).

Negative connotation: slag; slander; slang; slate; slaughter; sleazy; slight; slime; slink; slob; slog; slug; slop; sloth; slovenly; sludge; slum; slur; slurp; slush; slut; sly. (Crystal).

sn-

Unpleasantness: snag; snail; snake; snare; snarl; sneak; sneer; snide; snigger; snipe; snitch; snivel; snob; snoop; snooty; snot; snout; snub. (Crystal).

-ss

Sound of friction: hiss.

str-

Effort in face of resistance: strain; stress; stretch; strive; struggle. (Reay).

sw-

Smooth or wide-reaching movement: swaddle; swagger; to swan; swarm; swat; swathe; sway; sweep; swell; swerve; swill; swing; swipe; swirl; swish; swivel; swoop. (Crystal).

tw-

Pulling or turning with fingers: twang; tweak; tweezers; twiddle; twirl; twist. (Reay).

-u-

Blurring or muffling: blur; dud; dull; dumb; hum; muffle; mum; mumble; skulk; thud; thump. (Wescott).

-umble

Clumsy movement: bumble; fumble; stumble; tumble. (Reay).

v-

Snarling: venomous; vicious; vile; vindictive; vitriolic; vituperative. (Crystal).

[It is suggested that the fact that we bare our upper teeth when we pronounce these words just like an animal does when it snarls, indicates what

the sound is associated with.]

W-

Back and forth: wag; wiggle; wobble. (Rhodes).

Y-

Loud vocal noise: yak; yap; yell; yoicks. (Rhodes).

-ZZ- / -ZZ

Sound of friction: buzz; fizz; sizzle.

What similarities if any, then, are there between mimetic words in English and Japanese? Needless to say, the more mimetic words in English and Japanese have in common, the more credible the theory of sound symbolism becomes. However even if we were to find many matches, we would need to look at many more languages before being able to say that a particular sound is universally associated with a particular meaning. Also we can predict that there will not be a perfect match as the sound systems of the two languages are not identical.

In the following, as above, italicized letters refer to Japanese sounds and non-italicized letters refer to English sounds. Mimetic words in both languages have a number of things in common. (1) There is reduplication in various forms which is sometimes associated with repetition of sounds and actions. (2) Some Japanese mimetic words have vowels which are lengthened. There is also lengthening of vowels in some English words, which creates phonesthemes. In both cases this lengthening is associated with emphasis. (3) The nasals ‘-ng’ & ‘-n’ are associated with reverberation, albeit ‘-ng’ is a velar nasal while ‘-n’ is alveolar. (4) The low vowels ‘-a-’, ‘-a-’ seem to denote largeness, albeit ‘-a-’ (as in ‘father’ in British English) is a low back vowel whereas ‘-a-’ is a low central vowel. (5) The bilabial stops ‘b-’, ‘b-’ & ‘p-’, ‘p-’ indicate an abrupt onset. (6) The glottal fricatives ‘h-’, ‘h-’ appear to be associated with breath. (7) The high front vowels ‘-ea-’, ‘-ee-’, ‘-i-’, ‘-i-’ are

associated with high pitch and diminutiveness. As high pitch sounds are typically made by small or baby animals, it is easy to see the connection between high pitch and diminutiveness. (8) The liquids ‘-l’, ‘-rl’, ‘-r-’ have some association with roundness. (9) The approximants ‘-le’ ‘y-’ are associated with the idea of unreliable movement, albeit ‘-le’ is alveolar (a liquid) while ‘y-’ is palatal (a glide). (10) The voiceless alveo-palatal fricatives ‘-ash’, ‘-sh-’, the voiceless alveolar fricative ‘-ss’ as well as its voiced counterpart ‘-zz’, ‘z-’ all appear to be associated with noise.

What problems though are associated with this comparative analysis and how should we interpret the results? First of all, I should reiterate that the Japanese data was different to the English data. Because the Japanese language is rich in mimetic words, the Japanese data consisted only of wholly mimetic words and all of these were adverbs. However, due to the comparative paucity of mimetic words in English (a) the data I used, consisted of both wholly mimetic words as well as words containing only a single sound or sound cluster which was mimetic (b) unlike Japanese, the English data was not confined to a single lexical category such as adverbs. Another problem is that even if we accept that the above listing of English phonesthemes is far from complete, given that the integrated edition of the Oxford English Dictionary has over 500,000 entries, we can easily see what a tiny proportion of that total, the above examples represent. One implication of this is that many counter-examples can be produced to show that the meanings associated with the phonesthemes listed above do not apply to every word in the language containing the same sound or sound cluster. There are also homonyms of words containing phonesthemes, which do not themselves contain phonesthemes. Thus ‘y-’ in ‘yak’ = ‘persistent idle talk’ is associated with the meaning of ‘loud vocal noise’, but ‘y-’ in ‘yak’ = ‘Tibetan ox’ is not associated with ‘loud vocal noise’ or any other meaning. The fact that there are counter

examples which disprove the proposition that a given sound is always associated with a particular meaning or meanings, inevitably makes the theory of sound symbolism weaker. Another point is that given that (a) English and Japanese have such large vocabularies with many synonyms (b) the number of sounds in each language is limited (c) many sounds are common to both languages, there is a high probability that there will be some sounds in both languages associated with the same meanings. We can also understand from the fact that there are not a large number of matches of sound and meaning in English and Japanese that many phonesthemes are not universal but conventional and language specific. We have also seen in the summary of Japanese onomatopoeia that scholars are not in complete agreement regarding the meanings to be associated with particular sounds. One reason for this is that they did not use identical data for their analysis but even when the data is similar it may be interpreted in different ways. Not only this, but we see with both Japanese and English that in attempting to account for as much data as possible, scholars have sometimes come up with very loose root meanings (some might say too loose to be of any use). Another problem relates to whether words are analyzed into individual sounds or into sound clusters. Hamano, it will be recalled, analyzed mimetic adverbs in terms of individual sounds. However there doesn't seem to be any reason why one could not analyze these adverbs into larger sound clusters for example in the words '*hara-hara*' (flutter down), '*tara-tara*' (dripping), '*sara-sara*' (trickling), '*kara-kara*' (clattering), '*chara-chara*' (jangling) etc. one could analyze the mora '*-ra*' or the larger cluster '*-ara*'.

However, there seems to be other evidence, from research on female and male English names, which gives credence to the idea of sound symbolism. It has been found that women's names are more likely than men's to (a) begin with an unstressed syllable (b) contain the vowel 'i' (c) contain more syllables

(d) end in a vowel or a nasal stop. On the other hand, men's names have a greater tendency to end with a bilabial, alveolar or velar stop. It is suggested that one reason for the use of 'i' in female names might be because, as we have seen above, this vowel is associated with diminutiveness and high pitch. As high-pitched sounds are usually made by smaller, weaker, less threatening animals with small vocal tracts, it is suggested that 'i' is used in female names because smallness, weakness and lack of threat are thought of as desirable qualities for females. Equally, the use of phonologically lighter syllables in women's names i.e. names which end in a vowel or a nasal as well as names which begin with an unstressed syllable might also occur because light syllables are associated with weakness. On the other hand, the use of strong syllables in male names i.e. names ending with a bilabial, alveolar or velar stop as well as names having an initial stressed syllable might be because we associate the strong syllable with strength or aggressiveness which in turn are considered to be desirable qualities for males.

To sum up then, I do not dispute that, in the case of many words, the relation between the sounds which these words are composed of, and their meanings is arbitrary. Apart from this, perhaps another reason that linguists have dismissed mimetic words as merely uninteresting fringe phenomena is that their research has been centred on European languages, especially English, where there is not a large body of mimetic words. As we have seen, though, Japanese does have a large number of these words, which, Hamano believes, constitute a linguistic system with phonological constraints and semantic consistencies. No doubt some phonestemes are conventional and language specific but we have also seen that there are quite a number of similarities between mimetic words in English and Japanese, despite English, a member of the Indo-European language family, being unrelated to Japanese, a possible member of the Altaic language family. It would be interesting to find out

whether any of the similarities between Japanese and English mimetic words exist in other languages and hence whether any of the similarities could be considered as language universals. In conclusion then, it seems too extreme to write off sound symbolism as an uninteresting fringe phenomenon. However if one accepts that meaning and sound can never be fully separated, this means that the basic distinctions which most linguists accept of 'phoneme = a unit of sound' and 'morpheme = unit of meaning (made up of phonemes which in themselves do not mean anything)' are called into question.

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