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The Function of Sound Symbolism in the Japanese Language

Madison Buckles

Abstract

This paper examines sound symbolism in the Japanese language, primarily its role in linguistic qualities of onomatopoeia, and why it occurs in relation to language theory. Several reasons for the occurrence of sound symbolism are discussed, namely vowel and consonant associations; context of a speaker's language; and the development, significance, and necessity of these words. The paper concludes by arguing that the lack of research in the field of sound symbolism, despite its prominent role against the prevailing theory of language (which states that words are arbitrary in conjunction with their meaning), is another example of the Western world's tendency to focus on subjects that are Western-centric, and this demonstrates that the Western world has not cleared its biases toward Asian cultures completely.

Introduction

The origins of words and language have been the topic of study and debate since ancient times. The well-known Greek philosopher Plato is credited with one of the first conversations about the origins and correctness of names and words in his dialogue *Cratylus* (about 380 BCE). Since then, word and meaning association and relation have become an increasingly popular topic of study by linguists and anthropologists. The most prevailing and widely agreed upon theory to emerge from such scholarship is that of the arbitrariness of language. Made popular in modern linguistics

by Swiss linguist, semiotician, and philosopher, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) noted two primary characteristics of words and language in general: first, that words are arbitrary, meaning there is no reason for an object to be called what it is and that its association is cemented in historical context and development, and second, he noted that words gain meaning in relation to other words, essentially stating that a word can be defined by what it is not (Hutton 1989, 75). Saussure was not the first to conceptualize such a theory, yet he is considered the foremost contributor to its modern-day significance within the field of linguistics.

Within the past few centuries—relatively modern given the range of the field—some scholars, including Saussure, have found what appears to be an exception to the theory of arbitrariness. There is a category of words, ideophones, that rely on what is known as sound symbolism. Sound symbolism generally refers to a word or words that, in some physical or audial way, represent the object they are being used to define or name. In English, some common examples of these are *slam*, *knock*, or *boom*. The study of sound symbolism, however, has been somewhat of a controversial topic since its conception as many scholars remain unable to convey why sound symbolism occurs or what the origins of these words are since they appear to have some sort of “inherent meaning” (Nuckolls 1999, 226).

The Japanese language is an excellent demonstration of sound symbolic words, as its lexicon contains over 4,000 ideophones. Although many scholars find the arbitrariness of language to be the prevailing theory, the case for iconicity within ideophones in the Japanese lexicon remains contested, but not disproved. Research on the subject of sound symbolism point to several prevailing reasons as to why Japanese mimetic words and onomatopoeia have developed and have intrinsic meaning; the need for expansion within an ancient language, combined with certain associations of vowel and consonant sounds, and context and articulation, provide the unique makeup of the Japanese language and may explain why ideophones convey meaning. The frequent debate between arbitrariness and iconicity, however, leaves some holes in crucial information that could benefit from more in-depth scholarly inquiry. I propose that the lack of studies on sound symbolism and the crucial role it plays in other languages represents the Western world’s tendency to only focus on topics, events, or issues that concern it directly, and that is why language theory largely remains in accordance with Western research; moreover, this prevailing ignorance by the West, and by the rest of the scholarly world, is evidence that the Western world has not banished its ignorance of the value of Asian culture completely, and serves as testimony that the West has room to grow in terms of cultural appreciation and understanding of those cultures and languages outside of its borders.

Problem

The issue of sound symbolism is well articulated by Mutsumi Imai and Sotaro Kita in their study of sound symbolism: “Many languages of the world have a large grammatically defined class of sound symbolic words . . . in which the iconic relation between sounds and meaning is apparently felt by native speakers of the language and sometimes even by people who do not speak that language” (Imai 2014, 2). This iconic relation between sounds and meaning is a direct contrast to the theory of arbitrariness which states that there is no relation between a word and its meaning. Janis B. Nuckolls also questions that if sounds have meaning, “how . . . can the relatively small number of contrastive sounds in a language’s phonemic inventory participate in the creation of infinite varieties of meaning if those sounds themselves are meaningful?” (Nuckolls 1999, 226). Several scholars have attempted to debunk the apparent intrinsic meaning of these sound symbolic words.

Definitions

For the purposes of this paper, I will define the terms “ideophone,” “mimetic word,” “onomatopoeia,” “iconicity,” and “arbitrariness.” I will adopt Noriko Katsuki-Pestemer’s definition of ideophone as “a vivid representation of an idea or sound’ or ‘a word, often onomatopoeic, which describes a predicate, qualificative or adverb in respect to manner, color, sound, smell, action, state, or intensity” (Katsuki-Pestemer 2014, 1). I will also utilize Katsuki-Pestemer’s definitions of mimetic words and onomatopoeia as she accurately and concisely dictates the difference between the two: “onomatopoeia . . . are imitations of sounds and mimetics . . . convey precise information about the manner in which things occur, how actions are carried out, what situations things are in, what things feel/smell/taste like, and how human beings feel” (Katsuki-Pestemer 2014, 1). For iconicity, Shoko Hamano characterizes it as “the property of symbols replicating physical features of objects that they represent, [or] the degree of physical resemblance between a symbol and what it stands for” (Hamano 2000, 4&7). I will follow Yoko Hasegawa in defining arbitrariness as having “no logical or natural relationship between [a] word and its meaning” (Hasegawa 2014, 71). Because of the interrelation of ideophone, mimesis, and onomatopoeia, scholars tend to use these words interchangeably, therefore I will see no trouble in also doing so. Arbitrariness and iconicity will somewhat serve as opposites. Lastly, any mention of the “West” or the “Western world” will refer primarily to Europe and the United States, while the “East” or “Eastern world” is in reference to Asia.

Purpose of Japanese Ideophones and the Need for Linguistic Expansion

First, it is crucial to understand the purpose of ideophones in Japanese, as it explains why so many of them developed, as well as why scholars find them worth researching within the scope of arbitrariness and iconicity. As previously stated, the Japanese lexicon has about 4,000 to 4,500 different ideophones which are commonly dubbed onomatopoeia. In her monograph titled *Japanese: A Linguistic Introduction*, Yoko Hasegawa describes one of the most distinct features of Japanese in relation to other languages: “English has a large number of verbs, many of which express both the action and manner in which the action is performed. Japanese, by contrast, has fewer such verbs; the manner is instead typically expressed by an ideophone” (Hasegawa 2014, 72). Due to the fact that many other languages, like English, have an expansive vocabulary in which the words are laced with connotations, Japanese is sometimes considered less expressive. But as suggested by Hasegawa, Kristen Dexter explains that “in Japanese, a language that many people have so inaccurately called ‘vague in the past, onomatopoeia are there to fill that void . . . and not just in the ways we hear and see them in English as well as most Western European languages” (Dexter 2015) in her online learner’s guide “Japanese Onomatopoeia: The Definitive Guide.” Both authors go on to explain that many onomatopoeia and mimetic words used in Japanese take the place of adverbs and adjectives. Since most Western languages consider onomatopoeia words to be colloquial, they often misinterpret the purpose and significance of mimetic words in languages like Japanese that rely on them heavily as an expressive database. In addition, Nuckolls insists through her extensive research titled “The Case for Sound Symbolism” that because “linguistic sounds do more than communicate an unlimited number of messages,” they are entirely important in “express[ing] . . . emotional states, aesthetic apperceptions, and the alignments and interrelations . . . with other members of our social world” (Nuckolls 1999, 226). Not only do ideophones fill the void of descriptive language in Japanese, but they are essential to general expression and relations among speakers.

W. G. Aston discusses in his studies titled “Japanese Onomatopes and the Origin of Language” (one of the first modern published pieces on Japanese ideophones) that the addition of so many mimetic words to the language “is an instance of onomatopoeia providing a corrective to the general tendency of phonetic decay” (Aston 1894, 333). He notes that because the language is so ancient, there was a need for new vocabulary to develop over time in order to stay current with modern times. Overall, these scholars each explain that one primary reason for the expansive list of Japanese ideophones is because of the lack of certain descriptive parts of speech, namely

adverbs and adjectives, as well as the natural development of vocabulary to account for phonetic decay within a language with ancient origins.

Types of Ideophones and the Association of Sounds to Form Meaning

It is important to establish the different types of Japanese ideophones in order to more accurately portray their usage and how they convey meaning. According to Dexter, there are five main categories of Japanese ideophones: *giseigo* (擬声語), *giongo* (擬音語), *gitaigo* (擬態語), *giyogo* (擬容語), and *gijougo* (擬情語). She states that the first two categories, *giseigo* and *giongo*, “are just like onomatopoeia we have in English. The cow goes moo. The machine is whirring. They represent real sounds you can hear” (Dexter 2015). These categories represent animal and human sounds, and actual sounds made by inanimate objects and nature. Dexter continues, “The last three describe what’s called mimetic words. . . . They describe or represent something that has no sound” (Dexter 2015). *Gitaigo* describe conditions and states, while *giyogo* describe movements and motions. Finally, *gijougo* describe feelings. She adds that because “these mimetic words don’t really exist in English . . . it makes mastering them difficult when learning Japanese” (Dexter 2015).

As previously stated, these five categories of words usually function as adverbs or adjectives, but the question as to why they seem to have intrinsic meaning remains. Hasegawa explains one reason ideophones contain certain intrinsic meanings is due to the different sounds of vowels and consonants making up the words, and that specific combinations of sounds can give particular nuances to words. She notes how “voiceless consonants in expressive vocabulary are often associated with smallness and low intensity, whereas voiced consonants are associated with largeness and high intensity” (Hasegawa 2014, 71). For example, in the word *kirakira* (キラキラ), the voiceless consonant *k* is used to describe the twinkling of a star, which has a low intensity in terms of light. The word *giragira* (ギラギラ) utilizes the voiced consonant *g*, which in this case means the sizzling of the sun and is objectively more intense than the light of a star. Dexter sums up this point by saying “the voiced version [of a consonant] is always louder, heavier, and more intense than its unvoiced friend” (Dexter 2015). Another phenomenon that takes place with voiced consonant sounds is signifying negative meanings: “*betobeto* (べとべと) can indicate something very sticky such as melted chocolate, or a state of being soaked in perspiration” (Katsuki-Pestemer 2014, 14). This is just one way the slight differences in consonant sounds provide contrasting connotations in words.

Dexter later points out that consonants are useful again in “[telling] if [a word describes] something loud or strong based on what kind of consonant it has. Something using ‘loud’ voiced consonants might be banging, rolling thunder, or strong feelings. Something ‘half’ voiced will be noisy, but not loud, like the pitter patter of rain bouncing off of a window” (Dexter 2015). She explains that because some *hiragana* characters can be modified to transform from a voiceless to a voiced consonant (such as *ta* to *da*, or *ha* to *pa*), this also affects the intensity or volume of the word. If a voiced consonant was never modified, it will be the most intense, while a modified consonant that became a voiced consonant will become what she describes as “half voiced” and will not be as intense as the former.

In addition to consonant sounds, the vowel sounds are equally as important, as pointed out by Hasegawa and Dexter. Hasegawa illustrates that “high front vowels like /i/ [い] are associated with smallness, lightness, brightness, sharpness etc.” (Hasegawa 2014, 71). This can be highlighted by the word *pichipichi* (ピチピチ), which means “tight.” In contrast, “low vowels like /a/ [あ] are associated with largeness, heaviness, dullness, vigor, etc.,” and a good demonstration of this is the word *dabudabu* (だぶだぶ), meaning “loose” (Hasegawa 2014, 71). Dexter breaks vowels into three categories. She maintains that the Japanese vowels a, u, and o (あ, う, お) all represent long, slow sounds. Vowel sounds featuring i (い) are small and quick, and e (え) sounds typically hint at something negative (Dexter 2015). Both scholars assert that by using these guidelines combined with the consonant sounds, meaning can be derived from onomatopoeia and mimetic words.

Two more important factors that several scholars point out are the glottal stop (signified as っ in Japanese) and the contrast between long and short sounds. Katsuki-Pestemer states that “the glottal stop indicates a sudden movement,” just as the stop itself is a sudden sound for the speaker to announce in their words (Katsuki-Pestemer 2014, 11). “Long sounds are associated with sustained activities” explains Hasegawa, and “repetitions of short sounds are associated with repetitive actions” (Hasegawa 2014, 71–72). Examples of these would be *boubou* (ぼうぼう), meaning “burning” and *pachipachi* (パチパチ), meaning “clapping.” Moreover, Mutsumi Imai and Sotaro Kita further enhance these characteristics of sound by stating that “some types of sound symbolism show clear resemblance between properties of speech sounds and properties of their referents. For example, reduplication in Japanese mimetic words indicates repetition in the referent events” (Imai 1). In this case, they assert that the idea that properties of the words themselves, like the repetition in *pachipachi*, can be an important indication of meaning and context within the word that further assists in explaining how these ideophones acquire and relay their meaning. Overall, the association of certain consonant and vowel

sounds, as well as the properties of the words themselves, provide scholars with several viable reasons why ideophones have intrinsic meanings and qualities. Because certain sound combinations inspire particular nuances, meaning may be derived from ideophonic words.

Contextualization, Fluency, and Intonation

Other more definitive reasons scholars have found for sound symbolism within Japanese include levels of context of the word, fluency of the speaker, and intonation of the speaker. In her monograph *The Sound-Symbolic System of Japanese*, Shoko Hamano discusses that “for native speakers of Japanese . . . [ideophone] expressive meanings are immediately understood, and most of the mimetic expressions are readily identifiable as such” (Hamano 2000, 1). While this may seem obvious because native speakers are familiarized with vocabulary throughout their lives, Imai and Kita emphasize that Japanese sound symbolism is more complicated than that because “iconic relation between sounds and meaning is apparently felt by native speakers of the language and . . . even by people who do not speak that language” (Imai 1651, 2). They further explain that this could be due to the context provided by the words themselves. A native speaker, as displayed by Hamano, will be able to pick up on context immediately, but a non-speaker may be able to gauge some sort of meaning by utilizing the context of consonant and vowel sounds as previously mentioned. In a study done which tested Chinese, Chinese-learning-Japanese, and native Japanese speakers, Etsuko Haryu and Lihua Zhao recorded that “Chinese without knowledge of Japanese performed only at chance level, whereas Japanese and Japanese-learning Chinese successfully matched a voiced/unvoiced consonant with a big/small object respectively” (Haryu 2007, 424). They suggest that some sort of context of the Japanese language is a large determining factor in the amount of meaning that can be deduced from unknown words. Haryu and Zhou conclude that “the results suggest that the key to understanding the symbolic values of voicing contrasts in Japanese onomatopoeia is some basic knowledge that is intrinsic to the Japanese language” which, in this case, may be the series of vowel and consonant sounds that create nuance in words (Haryu 2007, 424).

Although Haryu and Zhou’s study results explain why some non-Japanese speakers cannot understand the so-called “intrinsic meaning,” they do not explain the phenomenon in which non-Japanese speakers do pick up on meaning. Imai and Kita introduce the possibility of articulation similarities between Japanese and other languages. They highlight that English speaker’s ability to absorb meaning from words may be due to the commonalities in experiences with articulation (Imai 1651, 3). They also

mention that English speakers generally find similar meanings in voiced and unvoiced consonants and certain vowels as Japanese speakers, which also contributes to a sort of shared connotation of words. Furthermore, Dexter recognizes that English speakers were not able to construct an entire definition of a word without context; non-Japanese speakers are typically read the Japanese ideophone in question and then provided several options for what it could mean. When asked to choose from these options, they could generally pinpoint the correct definition (Dexter 2015). With the context of other contrasting words, combined with the shared values of consonant and vowel nuances, these factors offer an explanation of the “intrinsic meanings” of various ideophones.

Concurrent to these theories, Aston suggests another reason non-Japanese speakers pick up on meanings: “The first differentiation of the shout was by means of variations of tone, which are still essential in this class of words. It matters little whether you say oh! ah! or aw if you only give the right intonation” (Aston 1894, 336). Similarly to what Hamano and Dexter signify, he justifies this intrinsic value as being a property of intonation or the manner that the word is spoken or presented. He pointedly remarks that language will always have natural connotations and that it is important to remember them when portraying Japanese words to non-speakers, as the way a word is said can reflect part of the meaning.

Additional Research

Scholarship on linguistic tendencies of sound symbolism in Japanese generally agrees on the fact that sound symbolism is undeniable in Japanese and that Japanese ideophones tend to have a sort of intrinsic meaning. While not all scholars agree on the exact reason for these meanings, the majority conclude that the need for modernization within the language itself, coupled with consonant and vowel associations and context from spoken words and other languages, are the main factors that led to the development of ideophones in Japanese and explain at least some of the reasoning behind these apparent universal meanings.

Many of these scholars also point to the glaring absence of research on the topic of ideophones in Japanese. Hamano remarks that “in spite of its systematic nature and significance, the Japanese mimetic system is one aspect of Japanese that is little understood. Very little systematic research has been done on it, and textbooks for non-native speakers include only the least sound-symbolic, most idiomatic items in the system which could be readily found in conventional dictionaries” (Hamano 2000, 2–3). Sound symbolism has begun to regain the interest of scholars since its battle with controversy within modern linguistics, but the broad topic is very sparsely researched, especially in terms of language-specific studies like Japanese

ideophones. Given the prominence and importance of ideophones in Japanese and other sound-symbolic languages, the field could benefit tremendously from more research done on not only ideophonic development, but on the reasons why these words truly have meanings that resonate with speakers of other languages.

Language in Accordance With the West

While the lack of research is in part due to the fact that sound symbolism gained a controversial reputation in the field of modern linguistics, Hamano also points out that the field of modern linguistics was developed in Europe, and sound symbolism plays a negligible role in most European languages (Hamano 2000, 4). Given that there is not a significant amount of sound-symbolic words in virtually any Western languages, and the fact that linguistics has remained a field of study that is still largely Western-centric, there was never any historical emphasis on studies about sound symbolism or its relation to language theory. Language has remained, to this effect, a field that stays within the Western perceptions of what is worthy of being studied and what is not.

This profound lack of attention to sound symbolism and the crucial role it plays in other languages represents the Western world's tendency to only focus on topics, events, or issues that concern it directly, and the field of sound symbolism in particular stands as evidence that the West has not banished its prejudices against the value of Eastern languages and cultures.

Throughout much of history, but specifically during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Japan and the West had a tense relationship in which these prejudices against Japan and the East surfaced and truly engrossed the West. In his "New Theses" *Shinron* 1825, Aizawa Seishisai, while discussing the dangers of the imposing West and the consequences this could have on Japan, notes that "everywhere they [soldiers incoming from the West] go, they set fire to shrines and temples, deceive and delude the people, and then invade and seize the country" (De Bary 2008, 347). Aizawa continues explaining the ill effects of Western influence in Asia, and, as he mentions above, knows that the entrance of the Western world, under any guise, is always for the same ultimate goal of colonization. As Aizawa states, culturally significant sites like shrines and temples were always the first things to be destroyed, and full-on colonization was the end product. Such sentiments within Japan later influenced Sakamoto Ryōma's "Eight-Point Proposal" in 1867 that preceded the installation of the Meiji government. In this proposal, points four and six directly coincide with the growing Western presence in Japan: "In dealing with foreign countries, appropriate regulations should be newly established" and "the navy should

be properly expanded” (De Bary 2008, 369). Hoping to avoid outright colonization from Europe or the United States, Japan warily opened its borders after over two hundred years of isolation during Tokugawa shogunate rule, and just a year after Sakamoto’s proposal. In his proposal, Sakamoto cautions his nation to properly set up defenses, both militarily and diplomatically, in order to maintain sovereignty, a task that many of Japan’s neighboring nations had not been able to do.

Sources from early Meiji Era Japan demonstrate that relations with the West were not only advised against, but based on the West’s treatment of other Asian nations, diplomatic and economic relationships were almost entirely unwelcome and only initiated to ensure the survival of Japan. Due to the West’s mistreatment of the East, these sentiments carry even further in history and culminate in the World Wars. In 1933, journalist Tokutomi Sohō detailed Japan’s withdrawal from the League of Nations and cited that it was “to protest the tyranny of the League . . . [and] give the wayward gentleman of Europe and America an object lesson . . . to awaken them to existence in Asia also of a strong-willed people” (De Bary 2008, 546). It was the severe hypocrisy and racism of the West that led to Japan needing to “teach” the West a lesson; Tokutomi writes on, “The world is not a place to monopolize, and [withdrawing] shows Asians they can be free from domination by Europeans and Americans” (De Bary 2008, 546). Again, this not only serves as evidence of the mistreatment of Japan and other Asian nations from the West: it also stands as a testament that Japan was vehemently against such behavior from the West and aimed for “self-government [and] autonomy for Asia” (De Bary 2008, 546).

The relationship between Japan and the West is articulated in these documents and portrays that this strained and unequal relationship was prevailing throughout multiple periods of history and not just one specific instance. These sources illustrate, from a distinctly Japanese perspective, that the West was entirely dismissive of the East as well as their national and cultural identities. While Western sources from these time periods may touch on Asia or the relationship of the West with Asia, it is almost always a gross understatement of the truth, and these Japanese sources offer insights that would not be possible with the use of American or European documents. These sources demonstrate that Japan sought to advocate for the equality of Asia to Europe and America, and even left the League of Nations in order to demonstrate their point entirely. Furthermore, the Japanese aim was always to help secure other Asian nations in the international sphere because Japan knew of the trials that came with doing so. Of course, there were instances in which Japan did more harm than good to some nations because of different ideology, methodology, and their own

colonization of nations of Korea and Taiwan, but this paper is solely in reference to Western ignorance of the Asian world.

Japan was forced to become a major world player before it was recognized by the Western world as worthy of pursuing in terms of forming allies and trade relationships; this much is conveyed through these sources as well as analyzing the current relations the Western world has with Japan. The nation is now an international powerhouse and demonstrates soft power throughout the world through popular media like anime and manga. The lack of scholarship on Japanese ideophones, which is such an important feature of the language and media that the international sphere so enjoys, is yet another example of the Western world's tendency to only focus on things that are centered on the West. While ignoring a subsection of language may not have the same effects as outright colonization, the message is the same: Japanese language and culture is unimportant to the West. Because scholars of linguistics working in the West cannot gain any value from pursuing research in the field of sound symbolism, it is insignificant to their world and therefore insignificant in general. This profound lack of research, and by extension, lack of effort to bring forth any research, proves that Western biases of the value of Eastern cultures have not completely dissipated.

In the case of Japan, a nation which fought vehemently not only for the equal treatment of nations like itself in the global sphere, but also made efforts by any means necessary to modernize and become on par with the West, it is still unclear why these biases would persist today. If the West put value of Asian cultures simply based on how equivalent economically, democratically, and influentially to European nations or America, then logically, these racist disparities would cease to exist with a nation like Japan because of how well it performs in all sectors. Therefore, it must be that there are still the underlying racial biases that continue to drive up divisions with the pretext of being trivial enough to not matter in some grander scheme, but in actuality are the root of the prejudices still held by the West today.

Conclusion

The lack of studies on sound symbolism, despite the crucial role it plays in other languages, represents the Western world's greater tendency to only focus on topics, events, or issues that concern it directly. In turn, this prevailing ignorance by the West, and the rest of the scholarly world, is evidence that the Western world has not banished its biases of the value of Asian culture completely. Although several reasons for the development and occurrence for sound symbolism have been discovered like vowel and consonant associations, context, and phonetic decay, these are still surface-level findings, and more information is needed on this anomaly to language theory.

Ideophones are essential in many languages, not just Japanese, but because modern linguistics remains dominated by Western scholars, no scholarship is emerging to benefit this crucial element of language. Just because modern linguistics began as a European field does not mean it must continue to be one; many Asian languages have structures similar to Japanese and would benefit tremendously from advanced research in ideophones in order to more effectively teach and communicate to speakers of other languages. Connecting with and understanding people different from oneself is essential to promoting an international sphere of peace, and better understanding one part of one language, specifically the Japanese language, could be a first step towards a more connected, less prejudiced future.

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