Onomatopoeia

Hiroshi Nara

In studying language, it is often pointed out that the connection between any word and what it signifies is arbitrary; that is, there is no a priori, compelling reason why, for instance, the domesticated four-legged canine animal should be called dog—it could very well have been pig. It was coincidental that this animal was named dog and it was through centuries of conventional use that dog became the linguistic sign in English to refer to this actual animal. The principle behind the arbitrariness of meaning-symbol connection holds up across languages. Nevertheless, there is a class of words in languages where the sound-meaning relationship shows certain connections. Such is the case with onomatopoeia, which is defined in the American Heritage Dictionary as words that "imitate the sounds associated with the objects or actions they refer to," such as "buzz" or "murmur."

Onomatopoeia, which might be defined as mimetic language, thus refers to the phenomenon where the pronunciation of a word suggests its actual meaning. In English we may describe the sound of a rock falling into water as splash—this is onomatopoeic. Examples abound from other languages in the same vein. This phenomenon of onomatopoeia illustrates an important aspect of language, for it is language that imposes a constraint on the description, that is different language begets different onomatopoeia for the 'same' sound. So the same sound is described differently in different languages. Take a recording of a dog barking. Japanese might describe this as wanwan, English ruffruff, Chinese wangwang, Russian guffguff, and so forth. Why the variety? Do humans not hear the same sound in the same way? The sound we hear is arguably identical but speakers of different languages describe it differently, each influenced by the sound structure of the language in question.

In English onomatopoeic words may be limited to certain language context, such as comic books and graphic, animated telling of an event. In Japanese, however, onomatopoeia constitutes a large class of words, numbering in the thousands. According to one conservative estimate, Japanese makes use of onomatopoeia three times as often as English. In Japanese, onomatopoeia is used in all kinds of prose and speech, formal or informal, whenever a precise, apt description is demanded. In Japanese grammar onomatopoeic words also function adverbially, so that it can be followed by X-(t)to 'saying X, making the sound X' and make an adverbial phrase modifying the predicate directly to signify the final state of action as in kushakusha tto
marumeta 'crumpled (paper)' or followed by an adverb making particle ni as in kushakusha ni 'into a crumpled wad.'

We also notice that almost all onomatopoeic words are reduplicated because they are descriptive of repeated, rhythmical sounds (but see, shikkari 'firmly' hatto 'all of a sudden'). Across languages reduplication has semantic commonalty, used to show plurality, repetition, and higher intensity of a phenomenon. In the examples below, we can see this principle is at work in Japanese.

There are two phenomena surrounding the use of onomatopoeia. First is the question as to what the speakers of Japanese implicitly understand the tacit rules needed to interpret or generate new onomatopoeia. The wide applicability of these rules means that brand new onomatopoeic words made up by someone are be readily understood as conveying a certain sense. The second concerns what sort of activities Japanese onomatopoeia covers. For although true onomatopoeia usually refers to words imitating sounds occurring in nature, many onomatopoeic words in Japanese are capable of describing activities and states that do not involve sound.

**Productivity**

When we examine the consonants and vowels that appear in a large number of Japanese onomatopoeia and their relationship to meaning, we notice some general tendencies. For these examples listed below, I will describe their meanings in parentheses, because precise English equivalents are difficult to find. Note as well that the description represents just one of two or more several possible meanings.

Voiceless consonants tend to signify a small, light, sharp, pretty, or positive activity, e.g. kirakira (small points of light shining), chirachira (glimpse of something showing), piripiri (spicy and tingling), tsuntsun (quick forward and stopping movement of a dragonfly in flight, someone having a haughty look), sakusaku (crushing and mashing on sand or sand-like surface; crunching crispy vegetable greens). On the other hand, voiced consonants generally signify a big, heavy, dull, dirty, or negative activity. Examples include giragira (glaring), daradara (fluid dripping in a messy manner; dallying), botabota (large drops of viscous fluid dripping), zakuzaku (crushing and mashing on hard, coarse, or granular material), biribiri (very spicy; sensation from an electric shock).

Vowel lengths can make a difference too--long vowels imply resonating sound, as in kān (a base hit perhaps) and gōn (the resonating sound of a temple bell; compare this to gôn), while short ones signify a smaller amount of resonance or sound duration. We also know that certain consonant choices can evoke a certain type of meaning. For instance, consonants such as those produced using the hard palate: /k, g/ denote hardness, sharpness, clear-cut, separateness, detachment, or sudden change (e.g.,
kachikachi (small hard objects hitting each other), kukkiri (clearly, in sharp contrast), kippari (resolutely, decisively), gara gara (a large object moving, sliding, or falling suddenly with a great noise), gō« (thrusting something into something with considerable force producing a noise). The sibilants /s, z/ refer to a quiet state or quiet and quick motion (e.g., sa (quickly), surusuru (someone climbing a rope or a tree quickly and easily, speaking fluently), shitoshito (fine rain falling steadily), shinmiri (feel something deeply), shin (a description of quietness, sound of people falling silent), shonbori (be deeply disappointed and crestfallen), kosokoso (do something in secret as if to avoid detection). The liquid consonant /r/ is often appear with fluid, smooth, slippery actions or conditions (e.g., sura (something comes out smoothly, quickly), kurukuru (spinning rapidly), tsurutsuru (something is slippery and shiny), nurunuru (slippery from viscous material), sarasara (something dry, is smooth and clean).

Nasal consonants /m, n/ are used to describe warm and soft objects. Examples include mukumuku (something like smoke billowing), muchimuchi (something warm, flexible, and fleshy to the touch), nayonayo (feeble and flexible), nichanicha (to adhere with gluey, gooey feeling), nyurunyuru (something slippery and smooth wiggles out quickly), nukunuku (warm and cozy), nechinechi (sticky and clingy). Words ending with a nasal expresses resonance (as we saw above in the cases of kān and kan) and rhythmicality as in binbin (reverberating loudly, repeating strong and loud sound), ponpon (hit something lightly repeatedly producing a resonating, hollow sound, say something quickly one after another), bunbun (propellers booming).

Because /p, b/ are both bilabial stops, they can refer to explosive, crisp, strong, or sudden changes in states. Examples include pa (quickly), pishari (slap a surface or say something highhandedly), pin to kuru (know right away), perapera (speak fluently), pinpin (be very healthy and energetic), pui (be annoyed), putsu (a thin thread or line is cut off with a snap), pokkari (wide open and hollowed out suddenly). The glide consonant /y/ imparts a sense that something is carried out weakly, softly, or slowly. Examples in this group include yoiyoi (old and mentally weak), yoboyobo (old people’s wobbly manner of walking), yoreyore (crumpled, said of clothes), yurayura (steam rising, gently wafting up, swaying gently right and left), yakkuri (slowly), yanwari (gently), yochiyochi (describes an infant walking not fully in control).

The Cy sequence (a consonant followed by /y/) appear to give a sense which combines the connotation of the C and the glide /y/. Thus kashakasha describes a machine, for instance, that produces the repetitious, highly punctuated, and light sound (the voiceless velar consonant) caused by quick, smooth movement of the machine (the sibilant). Another example of this type is guchagucha. This describes, for example, the unpleasant sound (the vowel /u/) of walking in a muddy field (the voiced velar consonant), in which heavy, wet mud is squished and squashed by the boots (the cha
part). This word can also describe making something neat into a big disorderly, ugly mess, as in messing up paperwork, ending up making a gooey mess in an attempt to make cookies, or failing to reach a business agreement at the last minute when it was all but complete, etc.

**Choice of Vowels**

In addition to consonants, vowels are endowed with certain attributes as well. The high back vowel /u/ is related to human physiology and psychology and can impart a rather vulgar or unpleasant connotation. Examples include utouto (dozing off to asleep), ukiuki (excited), usuusu (have a faint sense of something), uzuuzu (itching to begin), utsuratutsura (dozing, in light sleep), ukkari (unintended, carelessly), uttori (be in a trance-like, ecstatic state), unzari (be very weary), urouro (aimlessly wondering). The back vowel /o/ can denote something negative, of human physiology, or in slow movement, e.g., ozuozu (timidly), odoodo (nervous, upset, and timid), orooro (startled, confused, or upset), otaota (confused, frustrated), bosoboso (speaking haltingly in a low voice). The low vowel /a/ generally describes a slow movement, as in parapara (something granular, small, and light like raindrops falls), sarasara (water moving very lightly in a stream, quickly and without impedance). The mid-vowel /e/ is often seen in words that are vulgar or unsavory, e.g., hebereke (be very drunk and uncontrollable), herahera (smile contemptuously), teratera (something shines in an offensive way, like a dirty, oily face), mesomeso (cry quietly, often out of self-pity). As might be expected, the high front vowel /i/ appears most often in describing something that is small, sharp, or in quick movement. Piripiri (small, sharp pain or tingling), kirikiri (sharp pain occurring repeatedly), kīn (high-pitched, resonating, and metallic sound) are examples. Finally, a doubling of the consonant letter is used to indicate sudden stop, single occurrence, completeness, swiftness. Examples are patto (in one try), karatto (weather clears up completely and quickly), dosatto (something falls with a heavy thud), pichitto (something being joined completely without leaving any gap).

We note that the same onomatopoeic word can have several meanings depending on context. For example, harahara naku (cry harahara) refers to weeping, shedding tears but harahara suru means to be nervous and anxious about something or to be breathless in anticipation. Further, harahara chiru (fall harahara) describes a way small, light flower petals fall and scatter one after another.

**Beyond Imitating Sound in Nature**

In addition to onomatopoeic words which describe naturally occurring sounds, there is a huge variety of words for describing actions, processes, and conditions that are not accompanied by sound. Take the earlier example of splash. We noted that this is a
sound imitation of, for instance, a rock falling into water. This word need not be limited to that sense. For instance, the same word can appear in a more metaphorical context, as in the story about Princess Erika was splashed across the national papers. This type of semantic extension occurs frequently in Japanese, as we have seen some examples of this sort already. Take jitojito. This word describes a condition that is clammy, wet, or moldy caused by a period of rain. With its meaning extended, it describes someone's personality that is dark, obsessed, gloomy, and clingy. Another example mukamuka suru. This is not onomatopoeia in a strict sense because it does not describe a sound. Rather it is descriptive of one's upset stomach (Onaka ga mukamuka site kimochi ga warui "I feel nauseous in the stomach and feel sick"). Its meaning may be extended beyond a physical sensation but a mental state of anger, as in Ano hito ni au to mukamuka suru "Whenever I see him, he is revolts me." So we have seen three types of onomatopoeic words—the first type that describe mainly sound occurring in nature, second type that imitates sound as well as describes a state or condition, and the third type that describes primarily state or condition.

**Why So Many Onomatopoeia?**

One theory in an attempt to account for a heavy use of onomatopoeia proposes that the Japanese language, especially non-Chinese native vocabulary referring to action or condition, lacks a specific description of how action is carried out or condition obtained. For instance, take the case of crying. English can describe a variety of crying as cry, wail, sob, snivel, whimper, weep, etc., each conveying different type of crying. In contrast, Japanese has only one native Japanese word for crying—naku, and the meaning of this word is so general that it refers not only crying of people but to cries birds make. Although naku lacks the English specificity of meaning, Japanese can express a comparable range of crying types by adding appropriate onomatopoeic adverbs. Such examples include wanwan naku 'cry loudly shedding tears, resonating' wāwā naku 'cry loudly shedding tears,' gyāgyā naku 'cry loudly and out of control shedding tears', mesomeso naku 'sob continuously (often in self-pity)', shikushiku naku (cry softly and continuously), samezame naku (cry often out of regret and as part of spiritual cleansing), etc.

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Suggested Reading

