

The Sound-Symbolic System of Japanese. SHOKO HAMANO. *Studies in Japanese Linguistics*. Stanford, Cal.: Center for the Study of Language and Information, 1998. Pp. x + 262. \$59.95 (cloth), \$22.95 (paper).

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Hamano's 1998 book is – to this reviewer's knowledge – the most extensive and systematic study of the Japanese lexical stratum, referred to variously as *mimetic words*, *sound-symbolic words*, or *ideophones* inter alia. Although native speakers undoubtedly possess highly complex knowledge about their meanings and usage, mimetics represent concepts extremely difficult to explain to non-native speakers. Most previous studies have been confined within taxonomies; Hamano's highly ambitious attempt to provide a systematic account of the subject matter is praiseworthy. The book is organized as follows: following a brief introduction, chapter 2 provides general characteristics of the Japanese mimetic system from syntactic and phonological perspectives; chapters 3 and 4 present the hard core of the author's investigation and findings; chapter 5 discusses palatals and bilabials as well as historical development of mimetics; conclusions follow in chapter 6. The richness of the contents notwithstanding, some of the inherent difficulties accompanying investigations of mimetics are also present.

One of the main arguments of chapter 2 is that mimetic adverbials can be categorized in terms of their colloquialness and degree of iconicity. Hamano states that, with respect to quotative marking, those requiring either the quotative *to* or *te* are “the most colloquial and imitative end of the iconic continuum” (pp. 13-14), those requiring only *to* are less so than the first group, and those requiring neither *to* nor *te* are even “less colloquial and more conventional mimetic adverbs” (p. 13). Hamano also categorizes mimetic adverbials in terms of verbal collocations with *iu* ‘say’ and *sita* ‘did’ and the instances of what she calls “nominal adjectives.” It is claimed that those that occur with *iu* fall at the most iconic end, and “nominal adjectives” at the least of the iconicity scale.

This section is rudimentary; essential concepts are not defined clearly. For example, the author equates colloquialism with iconicity/conventionality; however, such relationships are not explained until chapter 5.3.3, where she reports that occurrences of mimetics in Tanizaki's *Makioka Sisters* (in Modern Japanese) are much more frequent than those in the *Tale of Genji* (in Late Old Japanese) and argues that mimetics are not favored in literary tradition. Throughout, mimetics are categorized into groups, with some groups claimed to be more iconic than others. The very notion of iconicity is defined crudely as “the property of symbols replicating physical features of objects that they represent” (p. 4). Without further elaboration, the author contends, for example, that *piin* as in *piin to haru* ‘stretch tightly’ is more iconic than *pīi-pīi* as in *pīi-pīi naku* ‘peep’ because the former requires either *to* or *te*, but that the latter does not. Similarly, *gyot-* in *gyot-to iu kao* ‘a look of surprise’ is said to be more iconic than *beto-beto* in *beto-beto no te* ‘sticky hand’ because the former appears with *iu*, but the latter is a “nominal adjective.” One wonders how the above-mentioned definition of iconicity should apply to such actual cases.

Inaccurate syntactic analyses cause another problem. Concerning collocation with *iu*, the author compares its functions as it appears in relative clauses and in mimetic expressions and concludes that the verb *iu* in the latter serves to “enhance the iconic and expressive representation of physical actions” (p. 18). What is not mentioned here is that *iu* is also used in noun complementation, e.g. *kuru to iu henzi* ‘the response indicating that (s/he) will come’ or *niku o yaku nioi* ‘the smell (that is caused by) grilling meat’. No substantial difference of *iu* between noun complementation and mimetic phrases appears to exist syntactically or semantically. The analysis of *sita* is also premature. It is claimed that *sita* ordinarily means ‘conducted’ or ‘accomplished’, and that its semantics is different when *sita* occurs in mimetic expressions (p. 18). Once again, the author ignores the fact that *sita* can be used either transitively (as it is mentioned) or intransitively, e.g. *zutuu ga sita* ‘a headache occurred, (I) have a headache’ or *oto ga sita* ‘a sound occurred, there was a noise’. Discussion as to whether the use of *sita* in mimetic phrases is unique and different from the intransitive *sita* is needed and may possibly shed some lights on the syntactic statuses of the mimetics in general. More problematic is the consideration of mimetics that occur with *no* as “nominal adjectives,” e.g. *pittari* in *natu ni pittari no huku* ‘an outfit that is appropriate in summer’. As pointed out by Iwasaki (1999), several homophonous *no* must be recognized. Although no definition of *nominal adjective* is provided, it can be inferred that the author considers such mimetics as nouns and *no* as the genitive marker. However, *no* in the above example must be regarded as the attributive form of the copula (i.e. *natu ni pittari no* is a relative clause) because, otherwise, the occurrence of the dative NP, *natu ni*, cannot be explained.

Regarding the phonology of mimetics, Hamano recognizes CV and CVCV roots with an additional coda nasal, coda obstruent, or second vocalic element as canonical. She contends that identical sounds function differently according to their positions in the root, and that such distributionally defined functions differ whether the root is CV or CVCV. A problem in the proposed conceptual framework should be pointed out. The author considers that onomatopoeia (e.g. *koke-kok-koo* ‘the rooster’s cry’, *hoo-hoke-kyo* ‘the Japanese nightingale’s singing’) are the most salient cases of sound symbolism, but those onomatopoeic expressions that do not conform to the canonical patterns of CV and CVCV are “not part of the sound-symbolic system proper” (p. 26). The claim that prototypical examples do not necessarily represent the system as a whole is significant, and this issue could and should have been thoroughly discussed.

Chapter 3 is devoted to a detailed analysis of CV-root mimetics, and chapter 4 to those with a CVCV-root. A brief summary of these chapters follows. (1) In addition to the iconicity between reduplication and repetitive events, reduplication of a CV root may indicate rapidity. (2) Coda nasal (N), coda obstruent (Q), and the lack thereof contrast the manner of event ending. (3) Vowel length is iconic to duration and/or strenuousness of the event. (4) Of the vowel sequences /oi, ui, ai/ in CV roots, /oi, ui/ indicate a circular movement. (5) /i, a, o, u/ indicate the shape of the object and the size of the affected area, whereas /e/ indicates vulgarity. (6) Palatalization indicates childishness and excessive energy. (7) Voiceless initial obstruents indicate light/small/fine/thin, whereas voiced initial obstruents indicate heavy/large/coarse/thick. (8) Initial /p, b/ indicate an abrupt, explosive event and a taut surface of the object in CV; they indicate only a taut surface in CVCV. (9) Initial /t, d/ indicate that the object has a lax surface in CV and a lax surface or subduedness in CVCV. (10) Initial /k, g/ indicate a contact with a

hard solid surface. (11) In CV, initial fricatives indicate smoothness of movement; in CVCV, /s, z/ indicate non-viscous body or quietness, and /h/ indicates weakness/softness/indeterminateness. (12) In CV, initial nasals indicate suppression or vagueness; in CVCV, /m/ indicates murkiness, and /n/ viscosity/stickiness/sliminess/sluggishness. (13) Initial /w/ indicates human or animal noise or emotional upheaval. (14) Initial /y/ in CVCV indicates leisurely, swinging, or unreliable motion. (15) In the second C-position in CVCV, /p, b/ indicate explosion/breaking/decisiveness; /t/ indicates hitting a surface or complete agreement; /k/ indicates opening/swelling/in-out movement; /s/ indicates a soft contact; /n/ indicates elasticity/unreliability/weakness; /y/ indicates haziness/childishness; /w/ indicates softness; /r/ indicates a fluid movement. (16) /ri/ attached to a CVCV root indicates a quiet ending.

These two chapters are extensive and contain many insightful observations. One question arises, however. Hamano does not refer to the rich experimental works on auditory perception. One is puzzled by such comments as “the likelihood that /yi/ historically merged with /i/” (p.75), for /yi/ and /i/ being impossible to distinguish, the period during which /yi/ and /i/ were distinctive is highly unlikely. Also needing attention is the fact that mimetics as a system involve conventionality, or arbitrariness. Therefore, as the author argues, it appears optimal to distill such conventionality from that which is due to universal human auditory perception. For example, /i/ is associated with a high sound because of the prominently high second resonance frequency, and this, in turn, is a cause of association with smallness because children have high voices (cf. Ohala 1983).

Chapter 5, which is devoted to phonotactics of palatals and bilabials and considers mimetics from a diachronic perspective, is well worth reading by itself. Pointing out that palatalization occurs only once in CVCV roots, and that while coronals can be palatalized in either syllable, non-coronals can be palatalized only in the first syllable, Hamano argues that palatalization originated from sound symbolism of childishness and represents this idea as /y/ being a floating autosegment. She also convincingly argues that, contrary to the claim that palatalization was added to Old Japanese under the influence of Chinese loan words, palatalization in mimetics was independently developed in Old Japanese. Regarding bilabials, Hamano contends that the distribution of /p/ in mimetics supports the theory that the historical development of intervocalic bilabials is *p ~ b > β > w (> ∅ __ / i, u, e, o). This chapter also considers an implication of the study of mimetics in the controversy regarding the Old Japanese vowel system.

Finally, a comment concerning what Hamano describes as “a perennial problem,” i.e. mimetics are not entirely distinct from the rest of the lexicon. Some words normally considered mimetic are originally derived from another stratum of the lexicon; conversely, some words commonly considered non-mimetic are derived from mimetics (p. 6). Despite the author’s awareness of the problem, many words considered within the book and included in the appendices are questionable. Furthermore, her stance as to whether the study of sound symbolism is about historical facts or about native speakers’ tacit knowledge, a common question in phonology, is unclear and merits explanation.

Overall, Hamano's book provides a rich resource for persons interested in sound symbolism and a thought-provoking interlude for those who contemplate conducting research in this understudied but nevertheless important aspect of human language.

References

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