

Sounds Like...: Understanding Japanese Sound Symbolism

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Prologue

We are reading a novel in a modern text class at a university in Tokyo. It is slow going. The troubled Japanese girl and her English grandmother make wild strawberry jam and each step in the process is described in great detail. There is a lot of unfamiliar vocabulary. We can guess the meaning of a lot of words based on their characters but nearly all the adverbs, describing how they handle the berries, how the girl walks when she carries the heavy bags of sugar, and how they stir the jam, are written in *hiragana*, the phonetic alphabet of Japanese. The meanings of these words are hard to guess. The professor patiently explains each one, “To the Japanese ear this motion,” he mimes stirring round and round, “sounds like *guru-guru*.” He draws a spiral on the board. “This is also *guru-guru*. When you read the same book over and over again, that is also *guru-guru*.” Later, walking home from the train, I see a sign I had never noticed before for a shop called *Guruguru Bagels*. Snails with their spiral shells adorn the awning. I get it!

Bagels are circular, snails are also a round-and-round shape, these bagels are so good customers will go back again and again. It is a clever play on words. It is also amazing how many meanings are expressed in those four syllables. *Guru-guru* is a useful word; surely others like it also have flexible meanings. Why have these pervasive and varied words not featured more prominently in my Japanese education up until now?

Introduction

The arbitrariness of the relationship between sound and meaning in language has long been accepted as a basic tenet of language since de Saussure's groundbreaking linguistic work. There is nothing special about the sounds /s/ /t/ /o/ /n/ that conjure up images of hard, dusty objects of various sizes and shapes. Stone, rock, pebble and boulder all describe the same kind of object, yet their syllables have little or nothing in common phonetically. Words that are phonetically similar to these words, however, do not necessarily share their meaning: phone, rake, bubble and molder. This arbitrariness seems essential for the nearly infinite meanings symbolized in human language to be expressed by combinations of a finite number of sound units (Ohala 1983). If each sound unit, or phoneme, carried its own semantic meaning, word formation would be limited both in potential number and meaning. On the whole, this assumption of arbitrariness in language, or in de Saussure's terms, "the arbitrariness of the sign" holds (1915 [1986]). However, there are exceptions.

Many languages have onomatopoeic systems for mimicking at least the sounds of animals and for some sounds objects make. For example *meh-meh* in Hebrew for the sound a goat makes, *cock-a-doodle-doo* in English for the sound a rooster makes, *ding* in English for the sound of a small bell and *klonk* in German for two dull, heavy objects

striking each other with some force. Although arbitrariness in language is essential, many languages have systems of related sound and meaning.

Such systems are more developed in some languages than in others. The sound symbolism of Japanese is one such well-developed and productive system. In addition to the onomatopoeic words describing animal sounds and the sounds of objects, it also includes ideophonic or sound symbolic words that describe physical and emotional states. In English, excessive use of onomatopoeic words usually devalues a description, making it sound childish, even silly. For example, describing the sound of your shoes and how you ran for class when you were late as, “I *slap-slap* ran *higgledy-piggledy*” sounds unnatural and unnecessary. This is not the case in Japanese, where sound symbolism makes descriptions more vivid and casual speech sound more natural (Nuckolls 1999). The sound symbolic system in Japanese is a crucial component of the spoken language; one that native-speakers learn early and may help accelerate their language learning, but that non-native speakers particularly those whose native language lacks such a system (e.g. English) struggle to master fluently.

While memorizing individual ideophonic words is no different than learning other vocabulary (and may actually be easier due to the widespread reduplicative structure prevalent in sound symbolic words), extrapolating meaning from unfamiliar ideophonic words is more complex. In the case of non-sound-symbolic words the process of extrapolation is similar to that of unfamiliar words in the native language - considering context, roots from known words, etc. – but these strategies do not work with sound symbolism. Instead, the language learner must consider semantic cues within the phonemes. For instance, voiced consonants usually mean bigger actions or effects than

unvoiced consonants and high vowels generally denote smaller things than low vowels, etc. (Hiroko 2003). I will explore the meanings of certain phonemes more deeply in Japanese sound symbolism later on. An intuitive understanding of these trends, largely absent in English, is hard to develop in non-native speakers.

For native Japanese speakers, however, this intuition develops to the point that the sound symbolic system is productive. Although there are many standardized sound symbolic words, native speakers can also create their own new words easily understood not just semantically, but also emotionally by their peers. A native Japanese speaker described a new sound symbolic word (a clock going *hatsu-hatsu-hatsu-hatsu*) she read in a poem as “fresh,” “bright,” “moving” (Koike, 2009). Ideophonics, flexible and welcoming to creativity, seem to take the place of other figurative language (simile, metaphor) generally absent in Japanese. Language learners who never receive sufficient instruction in sound symbolism miss an important tool for expressive communication. Starting with an investigation into why learning sound symbolism is crucial to learning Japanese, this paper suggests a more contextual and culture-oriented approach to foreign language teaching and learning. Along the way, I provide a semantic, phonetic, morphological and syntactic analysis of the Japanese sound symbolic system, and a comparative study of native and non-native acquisition. The factors that influence differences in acquisition will help us teach better as they shed light on how we learn.

1. Why Sound Symbolism Matters

Language and culture are interconnected. Whether culture forms around a language or vice versa is a chicken-and-egg question. Cultural norms and assumptions as well as the language itself influence what we express and how, how we think and how we

interpret the world around us. Given this link, the question arises of the role of cultural differences in the understanding of non-native sound symbolic systems. Specifically, in the case of native English speaking learners of Japanese, the popular idea of differences between the East Asian and Western minds comes to the fore. The general conception is that East Asian minds tend to have a more holistic view of the world, whereas Western minds are more object focused. This is clearly a sweeping generalization, but it can be useful in evaluating cultural differences. These differences are highlighted not to exoticize or essentialize a culture, but to help increase intercultural understanding for better communication and a greater ability to view situations from varying cultural perspectives.

Based on the assumption that East Asian minds tend to “view the world through a wide-angle lens, whereas Westerners have tunnel vision” (Nisbett 2003), two psychologists showed animated, color underwater vignettes to American and Japanese undergraduate students. The scenes all contained at least one fish in the foreground, exceptional in its size, speed and coloration. Each scene also contained slower moving animals, rocks, bubbles and plants. Participants were shown a scene for under a minute and then asked to describe what they had seen. The results showed that Americans tended to notice the focal fish whereas Japanese participants made more than 60% more references to the background elements than Americans did (Masuda & Nisbett 2001). In a true showing of holistic versus object-focused sight,

the very first sentence from the Japanese participants was likely to be one referring to the environment (“It looked like a pond”), whereas the first sentence from the Americans was three times as likely to be one referring to the focal fish (“There was a big fish, maybe a trout, moving off to the left”) (Nisbett 2003).

In a follow-up study, participants were shown ninety-six objects, half of which were taken from stills from the animated underwater scenes they had seen and half of which were images they had not seen before. Some of the stills from the underwater scenes had altered backgrounds and some were shown in their original environments. Participants were asked whether or not they had seen the objects before. Japanese participants were more likely to recognize objects they had seen before when they were shown with the original background than in a new environment. This suggests that in the mind of the Japanese participant, “the object had become “bound” to the environment when seen initially and remained that way in memory” (Nisbett 2003). The environment in which the object was shown had no impact on whether or not the American participants recognized objects they had seen before.

Differences in visual perception suggest differences in brain processing that affect language use and ways of expression. To the more object-focused Western mind, information expressed by sound symbolic words, e.g. nuances of manner, is considered non-essential to clear communication. To the holistically aware East Asian mind, this kind of information is a central part of expressing the whole of an action or situation. Given that language learning is tied to a certain awareness of environment, learners whose native language provokes a different awareness must learn to see their environment differently. In sociocognitive terms, all learning, but especially language learning is learning to adapt to “the background” (Atkinson 2007). This background is the social fabric that ties speakers of a particular language together, in addition to the physical environment they inhabit.

Sound symbolism is evidence of a very different awareness of the background. Learning sound symbolism goes beyond learning the words to learning what to see in the background and how to interpret it. But what of language learners whose culture has elements and viewpoints in common with the culture tied to the language being learned, Japanese culture, but whose native language does not share the sound symbolic qualities of Japanese? Native Chinese speakers, for example, should already have one piece of the intuition necessary to effectively use and understand Japanese sound symbolism; an awareness of the states and situations described by sound symbolic words, bred through their shared holistic worldview, their same awareness of the background.

Oszmianska (2001) argues that Japanese culture, among East Asian cultures is particularly receptive to sound symbolic expression, “due to its traditional attitude of “nonlogocentrism,” that is the preference for silence and visual (kinaesthetic) modes of communication which can be claimed to result in the drive towards the iconic, thus both auditory and visually determined, sound form of words.” In other words, deep-seated Japanese cultural values, which determine the way Japanese people see and interpret the world, have affected the types of language used to describe it. Of course, this is true for all natural languages. But this is a further example of the deep cultural basis for sound symbolic words in Japanese, and for their role as reflectors of the culture. Is Japanese culture considered “nonlogocentric” because of its extensive sound symbolic system, or does the language contain a large number of auditory and visually motivated words that stem from its nonlogocentricity? Either way, this highlights the necessity of an understanding of Japanese culture for understanding and properly using sound symbolic words.

Language is our means for articulating our interpretations of the world. “We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages...the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds” (Whorf 1956). Culture and language shape and are shaped by how their groups view the world. While of course, not everyone who speaks the same language and has the same culture has the exact same worldview or way of thinking, “a certain kind of thinking is encouraged by a certain language” (Maynard 1997). Native speakers of Japanese surely have a different view of the world and a different way of expressing it than native English speakers. Attitudes toward language itself, for example, the nonlogocentrism of Japanese, are a part of this difference.

On its own, language traditionally carries less weight in Japanese society than native English speaking American society. For example, “the American philosophy of “getting it in writing” and trusting written contracts, which makes words paramount, contrasts with Japan, where written documents are often important when they are supported by both parties’ goodwill and sincerity” (Maynard 1997). This emphasis on interpersonal relationships ultimately translates into treating language as a means for expressing the speaker’s or writer’s perspective, for sharing a worldview, rather than as a “conduit for information” (Maynard 1997) as language is often conceptualized in Western thought, particularly in American English. As information is conveyed from speaker to listener, from writer to reader, the emphasis is on the work of the producer of language. The listener or reader becomes a passive receiver of information.

In the Japanese view, however, words alone cannot contain ideas or thoughts, rather “social, situational, psychological and emotional factors must be incorporated

before understanding (the spirit of) words” (Maynard, 1997). That is, understanding the circumstances surrounding the words - the speaker’s social status compared to the listener’s, the speaker’s history or previous experiences with the topic under discussion and factors that might contribute to the speaker’s attitude towards the topic, etc. – are just as crucial to understanding the utterance as knowing the definitions of the words used. A holistic view of the world translates into a holistic view of language and communication.

The goal of communication is not to transmit information but rather to express situations so that both speaker recounting and listener interacting with the speech experience them. This cultural philosophy helps explain the linguistic phenomenon of a productive sound symbolic system. If the purpose of speech communication is to vividly share experiences, iconic figurative language becomes a necessity. It helps to ensure full mutual understanding between speech partners of sights and sounds.

The Japanese linguistic philosophy runs contrary to the common Western idea that language can be “reduced to an abstract body of linguistic rules that can be analyzed by appealing to the logician’s formal semantics” (Maynard 1997), which downplays the speaker’s connection to the language. In the standard Western model, the feelings of the speaker towards their topic, the relationship between speaker and listener, the human element of language is underemphasized. Maynard argues, “It is an article of faith that language exists apart from the speaker and his or her partner, not to mention their ‘voices from the heart.’” Faith that the traditional Japanese view of communication does not share with Western linguistic philosophy.

Japanese linguist Motoki Tokieda believed that the use of the first person subject “I”¹ by a speaker is not a strict reference to the self but rather “linguistic material” that expresses the way the speaker sees him or herself. It is similar in concept to a self-portrait. When the painter paints himself, the image is his perception of himself. In this view, “the meaning [of language] does not exist as the content or material of language; rather... language expresses the way the speaking subject grasps the material, and such expression evokes the material in the mind of the listener” (Tokieda, 1941). Sound symbolism is key in evoking the material, explicitly expressing the speaker’s interpretation of sounds or movements.

The speaker’s perspective is emphasized as they describe vividly what a movement “sounded like” to them. Although the meanings of many phonemes are standardized and mutually understood, flexibility of usage and the productivity allows for a more personal relationship with the description. The sounds themselves carry meaning, and so the speaker’s experience is directly translated into language, effectively eliminating the “middle-man” of arbitrary sound units. This creates a vivid communication and an opportunity for a visceral sharing of experience. Self-expression of this kind is unique to languages with extensive sound symbolic systems, and each language undoubtedly varies in the type of information expressed sound symbolically, based on different cultural and linguistic worldviews.

The deep impact of culture on how people use and understand language is exemplified in Eva Hoffman’s memoir, chronicling how learning English made her think,

¹ This is a more meaningful example in Japanese where a man has at least three choices of first person pronoun, each carrying slightly different nuances about his conception of himself.

use language and see the world in new ways (1989). Shortly after moving to Canada from Poland in the late 1950s, Hoffman and her mother meet a Canadian neighbor and engage in small talk. Afterwards, Hoffman tries to describe them. “Are these people pleasant or dull? Kindly or silly?” She recognizes that in English “kindness” has a different connotation than its Polish counterpart. In English, it has a moral quality and is unequivocally a positive descriptor. In Polish, however, “kindness has the tiniest element of irony.” “In Polish, you can call someone an idiot without particularly harsh feelings and with the zest of a strong judgment” (Hoffman 1989). In Polish, she knows she would call these people “silly” and “dull” but she knows that in English “kindly” and “pleasant” are more appropriate.

Culturally motivated linguistic assumptions have a massive impact on perception. Stories like these are evidence of the deep cultural understanding involved in understanding language. They are also evidence of the way a culture determines how we use language and how words are interpreted. Without cultural knowledge, understanding the nuances of words, and recognizing attitudes towards certain qualities, such as kindness, clear communication in that language is not possible. Understanding the nuances of usage and meaning of sound symbolism is one facet of cultural understanding crucial to effective communication in Japanese.

2. Defining Sound Symbolism

There are several words used to describe the linguistic phenomenon in which sound units (phoneme, syllable, feature) go beyond their contrastive arbitrariness to directly express their own meaning. *Onomatopoeic* is the most basic of them, referring to imitative sounds, for example, the sounds of leaves rustling or of dogs barking.

Ideophonic and *mimetic* may have slightly different nuances but are used here interchangeably to refer to words whose sound units carry meaning and describe non-auditory states and events (Bladon 1977). In Japanese, these are *gitaigo*. *Sound symbolic* is a blanket term used to encompass both imitative (onomatopoetic) and non-imitative (ideophonic/mimetic) words. To denote how closely or vividly a sound symbolic word describes an event the term *iconicity* is used. Onomatopoetic words, imitating sounds of the natural and human worlds, tend to be more iconic whereas ideophonic words tend to be less iconic.

In Japanese sound symbolic words are a distinct linguistic element, differing from non-sound symbolic words in their semantic, phonological, morphological, and syntactic categories. Linguists and educators alike commonly divide these words into three semantic categories:

The Sound Symbolic System of Japanese			
Classification	definition	example	definition of example
<i>Giseigo</i>	the sounds of animals	<i>nya-nya</i>	the sound a cat makes
<i>Giongo</i>	the sounds of objects	<i>pota-pota</i>	the sound of dripping water
<i>Gitaigo</i>	the sounds of physical and emotional states	<i>fura-fura</i>	the sound of being dizzy

Giseigo and *giongo* are mostly imitative and occur in many languages. *Gitaigo* is what makes sound symbolism in Japanese unique.

Words semantically categorized as *gitaigo* range from describing feelings of sickness and pain (*muka-muka* describes nausea, *zuki-zuki* and *hiri-hiri* describe throbbing and burning pain respectively), to taste (*koQte'ri*² is a rich, lingering flavor), emotion (*waku-waku* describes nervous excitement) and all manner of modes of

² In this romanization system “Q” is an accent, pronounced as a glottal stop. The vocal cords are tightened and then suddenly released, creating a small break in the word.

performing actions (can you hear the difference between sleeping like *guu-guu* and *suya-suya*?). Given the wide range of meanings it is odd that these words are all categorized together. The main thing they have in common is that despite the fact that their descriptees do not make any sound, they are labeled as sound symbolic. It would be logical to divide *gitaigo* into two groups: one for physical and one for emotional states. On the other hand, perhaps the real problem with the *gitaigo* classification is that it falls under “sound symbolism” itself. For the many *gitaigo* that describe ways of moving and shapes of objects, “Shape symbolism” or “form symbolism” might be a more accurate and descriptive classification. *Gitaigo* that describe emotional states might be classified as “feeling symbolism” or “touch symbolism.” *Gitaigo* that describe textures and consistencies might be grouped similarly. For simplicity’s sake, and because their syntactic usages are similar to other sound symbolic words, however, throughout this paper I will continue to use sound symbolism to refer to even those ideophonic words that describe shape or form.

Mimetic words can additionally be semantically flexible with regard to their referents. Ideophones describing physical states such as sticky, *neba*, express either the sticky feeling, the sticky movement, or potentially the sticky sound (Hamano 1998). This ambiguity is usually resolved in the syntax, but it does complicate the issue of iconicity in mimetic words. The sticky sound *neba* is more iconic than the sticky movement described by *neba*, which, in turn is probably more iconic than the sticky feeling that can be described by the same word. This suggests that the iconicity of a single word is not constant but rather changes depending on usage. It follows then, that an inarticulate use of a mimetic word lessens its iconicity. Since one purpose, beyond simple expression, of

using sound symbolic words in Japanese is to add vibrancy and vividness afforded by iconic words, this has powerful implications for the sound symbolic language learner. Non-native speakers especially must have a clear understanding of which contexts sound symbolic words work best in. With the nuances in meaning of these words highly dependent on context, mastery of the sound symbolic system becomes more complex.

Sound symbolic words, especially mimetics, often also have the property of being culture-specific in their meaning and thus difficult to translate. Culture, intertwined as it is with language, affects the meaning and perception of words in various linguistic categories. For instance, the English word *jock* is culturally motivated in its meaning in that if one does not understand the conventional social roles in American high school lore, the expected assumptions about a person described this way would be lost. Similarly, the word *hippie* and the implications of its use to describe a person or behavior cannot be fully understood without knowledge of American history and cultural associations. Mimetic words in Japanese produce a similar comprehension problem, but instead of an imperative knowledge of cultural values, it is an understanding of the way a culture hears or listens that is necessary to grasp the meaning of ideophones.

As words defined by the significance of their sounds, it is no surprise that sound symbolic words have distinct phonological properties, often in opposition to patterns found in the rest of Japanese. The most glaring of these is the initial /p/, common in sound symbolic words but rarely occurring in the rest of Japanese. Except for loan words like *purojyekuto* (project), *pasokon* (personal computer) and *piiza* (pizza), Japanese words beginning with this sound can almost always be classified as sound symbolic. Some common /p/ initial sound symbolic words include *pera-pera* (fluent(ly)), *pota-pota*

(the sound of dripping water) and *pata-pata* (the sound of thin, light objects hitting or flapping, the appearance of hands and feet busily moving) (Fukuda 2003). On the other hand, sound symbolic words also correspond to general Japanese phonology in some cases, for example, as in non-sound symbolic words, they tend not to begin with /r/ (Hamano 1998).

Beyond surface phonological differences between sound symbolic and other words, however, is the principle most basic to sound symbolism: that individual phonemes carry their own semantic meaning. These vary from whole syllables to sound features like voiced/unvoiced consonants and front/back vowels. Meaning imbued sound units are most common in *gitaigo* classified mimetic words, though they also occur in *giongo*, but rarely in *giseigo*. What follows is an attempt to systematically define the meanings of such features and how these meanings combine to create sound symbolic words.

Sound	Meaning	Example
<i>a, u, o</i> versus <i>i</i>	a large and slow object or motion versus a small and quick one	<i>buyo-buyo</i> = flabby <i>iso-iso</i> = lively
unvoiced versus voiced consonants	a light object or motion, a high-pitched sound versus a heavy, dull object or motion, a low-pitched sound	<i>kaa-kaa</i> = a bird's cry <i>gaa-gaa</i> = a human wailing, a loud, mechanical sound <i>saku-saku</i> = a light sound of mixing a sandlike substance <i>zaku-zaku</i> = sound of mixing a hard, rough grainy substance <i>ton-ton</i> = a light striking sound <i>don-don</i> = strong sound of hard objects striking
the phoneme <i>chi</i>	smallness or quickness	<i>chibi-chibi</i> = a little at a time

		<i>chobo-chobo</i> = sparsely scattered, a small amount <i>chirin-chirin</i> = the sound of a small bell
the phoneme <i>no</i>	slowness	<i>noso-noso</i> = moving slowly, clumsily, lumbering <i>nobi-nobi</i> = leisurely, easily, relaxed <i>noro-noro</i> = moving slowly, sluggishly

(Fukuda 2003).

The Japanese Sound Symbolic system is also divided into several morphological categories (Hamano 1998). For now, I will focus on the following two major classifications:

Accentless reduplicatives		Accented forms + 'ri	
<i>gan-gan</i>	a pounding headache	<i>haQki'ri</i>	clearly
<i>doki-doki</i>	a beating heart; expresses excitement	<i>taQpu'ri</i>	plenty; a full amount
<i>nyoro-nyoro</i>	something long and thin; a wriggling motion	<i>saQpa'ri</i>	a refreshing flavor
<i>zaa-zaa</i>	the sound of torrents	<i>shiQka'ri</i>	a solid foundation, trustworthy, sufficiently

Accentless reduplicatives are defined as words that have equal stress distribution among each syllable. Although there are two counter-examples listed above, words that follow this pattern are usually made up of repeated dual-syllable units. This reduplicated pattern is common among sound symbolic words in other languages as varied as Tuvan, English and Chinese in addition to being prevalent in Japanese. Accented forms + 'ri all contain the glottal stop accent romanized here with *Q*. The glottal stop, articulated for a millisecond, creates a slight jog or jump in the word and is usually followed by a rise in intonation.

These two word shapes correspond to syntactic categories. The accentless reduplicatives are nominal adjectives. They occur with nouns together with the

modifying particle *na* and with verbs together with the quotative particle *to*. The quotative particle acts like quotation marks within a sentence, following the phrase or sentence it quotes. Ordinarily, it occurs with verbs like *iu* (say), *kangaeru* (think) and *kiku* (ask) that would require a relative clause in English; i.e. *I said that...*, *I think that...*, *I asked if...*. The quotative particle *to* serves a similar function to the English word *that* in these kinds of constructions. When accentless reduplicatives occur with verbs (and some nouns) they take on an adverbial meaning. For example, in the case of *nyoro-nyoro*, defined above, when used with *to + ugoku* (to move) it means “to move like *nyoro-nyoro*” or “to wriggle.” *Gan-gan* is used in a similar way with the noun *itai* (hurts).

Atama ga gan-gan to itai desu.
 Head (subject marker) pounding (quotative particle) hurts (statement marker)
 I have a pounding headache.³

The nominal adjective describes the manner of hurting. There are also certain mimetic nominal adjectives belonging to this class that are often used with *to + iu* (to say) to express a similarly adverbial “sounds like” meaning.

Zaa-zaa to iu mizu no oto
 Like a torrent (quotative particle) says water (genitive particle) sound
 the sound of water that sounds like a torrent (Hamano 1998)

Words used in this way are mostly onomatopoeic words, imitative of the sounds of nature, including animal and object sounds. But *gitaigo* that describes a physical state or manner that is less iconic also sometimes occurs in this construction.

nyoro-nyoro to iu ugoki-kata
 wiggling (quotative particle) says movement-mode
 a movement that is a wiggling motion

³ All example sentences are by the author unless otherwise noted.

In this phrase, *iu* is basically meaningless. The movement itself does not have a sound or “say” anything. Rather, *iu* acts to “mark off and enhance the iconic and expressive representation of physical actions” (Hamano 1998). In other words, these adjectives do not function on their own with nouns, instead they use this quotative structure to attach to the nouns they modify. In addition, the quotative structure, in using a verb that means “say”, emphasizes the fact that the modifier is sound symbolic.

Accentless reduplicatives also occur with forms of the verb *suru* (to do): its progressive, *shiteru*, and past tense, *shita*, forms.

<i>doki-doki</i>	<i>shiteru.</i>
a beating heart	I am doing
I am excited.	

The verb form *shiteru* in this sentence has no real semantic meaning. It functions syntactically only to turn the nominal adjective *doki-doki* into a verb (Hamano 1998).

The agency and action that usually go along with the use of a “to do” verb are absent.

<i>doki-doki</i>	<i>shita</i>	<i>kimochi</i>
a beating heart	do (past tense)	feeling
an excited feeling		

In this case, too, *shita* is “semantically vacuous” (Hamano 1998). It simply joins *doki-doki* and *kimochi*, with a similar function to a genitive (i.e. possessive or noun-connecting) particle. Syntactically, again, it has made *doki-doki* function as a verb. The prevalence of these forms, however, exemplifies how easily the accentless reduplicative class of sound symbolic words is used as verbs.

The second morphological class of sound symbolic words presented, the accented forms + *'ri* correspond to a more straightforward syntactic usage. These forms are almost universally used adverbially, coming directly before the verb they modify.

haQki'ri *wakara* *nai.*
 clearly know (negative)
 I don't clearly know.

Like accentless reduplicative forms, they often describe a manner or mode of performing an action. But their use with a wider variety of verbs, and the rareness of their occurrence with forms of *suru* points to an emphasis on the adverbial meaning. Unlike accentless reduplicative forms, they are not often used as verbs.

shio *wo* *taQpu'ri* *kakete* *kudasai.*
 salt (object particle) plenty put on please
 Please put on plenty of salt.

A meaning expressed by an accented form + *'ri* is less likely to be the focus of an utterance and more likely to provide supporting details. One exception to this generalization is the use of these forms that describe flavor.

sapa'ri *shita* *orenji*
 a refreshing flavor do (past tense) orange
 an orange with a refreshing flavor

In this case, the accented form + *'ri* functions similarly to accentless reduplicatives like *doki-doki*. But *shita* does not function to give agency to this adverb; instead it is a nominalizer, acting as a genitive particle to attach the sound symbolic adverb to *orenji*.

One other substantive difference between the accentless reduplicative and accented + *'ri* forms are that the former have few if any non-sound symbolic synonyms, whereas the latter can almost always be replaced with a non-sound symbolic words with little change in meaning.

Yoku wakara nai.
 Well know (negative)
 I don't really know.

Shio *wo* *iQpai* *kakete* *kudasai.*
 Salt (object particle) a lot put on please

Please put on a lot of salt.

Sapa'ri and other words of this form that describe flavor are once more an exception to this generalization.

The easy substitution of a non-sound symbolic word in these cases shows the weakness of the iconicity of the accented form + *'ri*. The nuances of meaning, the vividness added by the use of other kinds of sound symbolic words, that is accentless reduplicative forms, is missing from these mimetics. This contrast highlights the expressiveness of sound symbolic words that do not have non-sound symbolic synonyms. Their meaning is not only unique, but also richly complex, not fully expressible in any words but the word itself.

Here, the sound symbolic system in Japanese has been defined within multiple sub-disciplines of linguistics. Mimetic and onomatopoeic words in Japanese are not eccentric oddities of the language, but rather part of a well-developed, systematic class of words, their own bona fide linguistic category. Due to the flexibility of their usage and vibrancy of meaning as outlined above, the remainder of my analysis focuses on the words making up the accentless reduplicative class of sound symbolic words.

3. Is Sound Symbolism Universal?

Now that I have shown how these words function in Japanese, I will explore the effect they have on the language as a whole from the viewpoint of language learning. I will consider the experiences of native and non-native Japanese speakers and philosophies and practices that are useful for teaching these words to Japanese language learners. The compatibility of sound symbolic concepts in one language with those of

another has bearing on how sound symbolic words affect language acquisition among native speakers of various languages.

Onomatopoeia occurs cross-linguistically, and even languages without fully developed sound symbolic systems exhibit some words with mimetic components in addition to the functionally ubiquitous animal noises. Contrary to the idea that ideophonic meanings are highly culturally motivated, some meanings of these mimetic components may be recognizable cross-linguistically and cross-culturally, if not universally. These theoretically range from meaning ascribed to vowel highness and lowness to concepts associated with certain consonants.

In a study to show the association among English speakers of high vowels with small things versus low vowels with big things the psychologist and linguist Edward Sapir compiled two lists of nonsense words. The first list of word-pairs included words made up only of sounds that occur in English and the phonetic contrast *a* and *i* like the fabricated minimal pair *mal* and *mil*. The second list contained words made up of sounds with which a native English speaker would not necessarily be familiar and the same phonetic contrast *a* and *i*. Subjects were asked which word described a small thing and which word described a big thing. In both the first and second sets of words, he found that “[t]he effective score in favor of *a* as the vowel inherently symbolizing a large rather than a small reference was...81 per cent” (Sapir 1928).

A follow up study tested more word pairs and more varied contrastive vowel pairs, “*a* of German *Mann*, *a* of English *hat*, *e* and English *met*, *e* of French *ete*, *i* of French *fini*” (Sapir 1928). Sapir also broadened his subject base to include children, adults and native speakers of Chinese. The findings corroborate those of the previous

study. There was negligible difference between native English and Chinese speakers' association patterns. In other words, there seems to be some kind of collective understanding about what semantic value these vowels have.

Vowel quality has also been shown to have a link to shapes of associated objects, meanings that may be understood across linguistic boundaries. A study involving a forced choice task in which “2.5-year-olds were asked to select the object (out of two) that was referred to by a novel word, the children matched rounder shapes to words containing the vowels [ah] or [u] (e.g. Bamu) and pointed shapes to words containing the vowels /i/, /ej/...”(Imai 2008) was repeated with speakers of Kitongwe in Tanzania, with similar results.

These studies may not be evidence of the overwhelming universality of sound symbolic concepts – intercultural examples of shared sound symbolism exist, but are not widespread - but they at least show that speakers of one language share assumptions about what meaning certain sound units carry. This means that in order for a non-native speaker to learn a sound symbolic system of a language they must train their ear to make the same phonetic assumptions that may not be shared in their native language. This is especially true for a productive sound symbolic system like Japanese in which native speakers frequently create new onomatopoeic or mimetic words based on other sound symbolic words and cultural assumptions about correspondences between sound and meaning.

4. Native Sound Symbolism Acquisition

The association among native English speakers of sound symbolic, especially onomatopoeic words, with baby talk and unsophisticated speech in general may not be

wholly prejudiced. Japanese parents and other adults do tend to use a greater percentage of sounds symbolic words with young children than with older ones (Imai, 2008). This discrepancy has practical causes. Whether the learner is acquiring language for the first, fourth or thirteenth time, verbs take longer to learn than nouns. A noun is easy.

Notwithstanding potential morphological changes, learning a noun, a concrete one that is, is simply the association of object with sound. Most children can associate general names of objects, *chair* for example, with any object that falls into that category. That is most children know that any given chair is a chair even if they have never seen that particular chair before by the time they are three years old. Verbs, on the other hand, require more complex processing. Beyond the action, a verb has other information, like tense, aspect, subject, object, encoded within it that make isolating the action difficult. Most children begin to generalize the action of a verb, that is, isolate the action and apply it in novel contexts, by age five. Recent studies show that sound symbolism may help Japanese children learn verbs earlier.

A study by Japanese linguists tested whether children ranging from three to five are able to generalize verbs earlier when the verbs are sound symbolic. The Japanese children were shown an unfamiliar action, for example, twisting to the side while punching with one arm, twice, varying the actor or the object. The first time they saw the action it was described with an unfamiliar verb, either sound symbolic or non-sound symbolic. To ascertain whether or not the children were able to generalize the action of the verb, they were asked to name the action after they saw it for a second time (Imai 2008).

As expected, five-year-old children were able to generalize the verbs whether they were described by a sound symbolic word or not. Three-year-old children, on the other hand, were never able to generalize a non-sound symbolic verb, but were sometimes able to generalize the sound symbolic one (Imai 2008). This suggests that sound symbolism is a scaffolding tool that helps children become more expressive earlier in their development. It seems that, “the iconicity provided by sound symbolism may help children focus on the manner component of the action” (Imai 2008). In other words, sound symbolism aids language acquisition for native speakers.

In a related experiment, two-year-old and three-year-old Japanese children were shown an action specified by an original mimetic verb simultaneously with an action not specified by the verb. These original mimetic verbs are nominal adjectives of an accentless reduplicative shape made into verbs by being attached to the verb *suru*. They follow sound symbolic patterns of meaning specified above. For example, /g/ describes a heavy movement; the phoneme *chi* describes a small movement or action, etc. Child subjects in the experiment were able to identify the correct action, the one specified by the mimetic verb, over 70% of the time. When the same experiment was performed on adult native Japanese speakers, they identified the correct action with 100% accuracy (Imai 2008).

This suggests that while the understanding of sound symbolism begins developing early, like all language, it takes time to develop fluency. Sound symbolic words are a language acquisition tool for children, and adults tend to use these words often in communication with younger children. Intuition about sound symbolic meaning thus begins developing early in Japanese children and is a basis on which future language

learning and linguistic understanding is built. These studies also highlight the incredible productivity of sound symbolic words in Japanese. Native speakers have not only an intuition about the general meaning of combinations of different sound units, but also what amounts to a lexical knowledge of high occurrence phonemes.

This phonological understanding about their native languages is present among speakers of other languages as well. In a study of adult native English speakers, participants were asked to provide definitions of 20 obsolete sound symbolic and non-sound symbolic English words. Then in the recognition portion of the study, participants chose the definition of the same 40 words in a multiple-choice test. The findings were fairly conclusive: “participants were able to generate better definitions for sound symbolic words when compared to non-sound symbolic words. Participants were also more likely to recognize the meanings of sound symbolic words” (Parault and Schwanenflugel 2006). These researchers identified a possibility of skewed results, however, when they realized many definitions produced shared the same word-initial sound symbolism as the obsolete sound symbolic words. For example, the obsolete sound symbolic word *dreen*, meaning *to remove all water*, might be defined with *drain*, which contains the same *dr-* sound symbolic phoneme, meaning *running water* (Bloomfield, 1933).

This suggests that the “effect of sound-symbolism [is] simply a result of word association emanating from the initial word sound, a type of ‘sound associations,’” rather than “sound-symbolism go[ing] beyond this kind of initial sound guessing to a more fundamental meaning process” (Parault and Schwanenflugel 2006). If the former proved more likely, sound symbolism in English would not truly exist the same way it does in

Japanese. Rather than an intuitive semantic understanding of certain sound units, this would suggest that any sound symbolic knowledge native English speakers have is based simply on comparing and associating sounds between words.

When definitions with matching word-initial sounds were removed from the study, however, the results remained unchanged, “sound-symbolism continued to exert a significant effect on the guessing of potential word meanings” (Parault and Schwanenflugel 2006). Sound association may play a role in identifying sound symbolic meanings, but the bulk of understanding does seem to come from culturally based notional definitions of sound units and an established understanding of the way sounds and movements should be translated into English’s phonetic vocabulary. Further, sound symbolism seems to play a significant role in word learning. This study is evidence of the intuition about the meaning of sound units that develops, and as Parault and Schwanenflugel (2006) point out, “the guess phase of this study would actually be harder than a normal word-learning situation in that these words were presented in isolation.” Even in a language like English where sound symbolism is less pervasive and less developed, it is a valuable tool for learning and understanding unfamiliar words. This study can only hint at how indispensable an intuitive understanding of the relationship between sound and meaning in these words is in a language like Japanese where sound symbolic words are widespread.

Recognizing and creating sound symbolic words is, for a native speaker, an act of translating audio and visual qualities into the phonetic vocabulary of Japanese; “[t]he potential sound symbolic cogency of particular phonemes is usually constrained by the phonological repertoire of a given language, subsequently the attached meanings fall into

semantic relations within the lexicon and the notional system” (Oszmianska 2001). The meanings and nuances of phonemes fall in line with sound meanings throughout the language. As stated earlier, children learn these associations early, and that they act as a base on which further linguistic understanding is built. This points to not only the importance of sound symbolic words to the language, but also to how deep-seated the phonetic meanings are for native speakers. They are crucial to understanding the language as a whole and being fully expressive in it. Experiences expressed by single sound symbolic, especially mimetic, words, usually the work of figurative phrases like metaphors and similes in languages without a sound symbolic system, adds powerful freshness to utterances.

5. Learning Sound Symbolism

Native speakers of languages like English without such a large mimetic vocabulary face several problems in understanding and using the Japanese sound symbolic system. They lack not only the lexical knowledge of phonemes, but also the cultural knowledge and intuition for how to translate sounds they hear into the Japanese phonetic vocabulary. For such speakers, sound symbolism simply isn't a part of language normally learned or thought about. That is not to say, however, that these speakers have no semantic associations with particular sound units.

In a third trial of the experiment described above, in which subjects were shown two actions on a split screen and asked to identify which was best described by a given original mimetic word, native English speaking adults with no prior exposure to Japanese identified the correct action 64% of the time. This again points back to the aspect of universality to sound symbolic words. But guessing right at a rate of over half does not

indicate the kind of understanding necessary for full expressiveness. Native English speakers do not have the same intuition for phonetic meanings, rather “correlations among consonantal clusters or vowels are recognized by the speakers of English due to the ‘habitual phoneticizing of experience’” (Oszmianska 2001). The association of onomatopoeic sound meanings, that is mimicking sounds, differs from more abstract mimetic ones. There is a difference between a native English speaker’s understanding of sound and the native Japanese speakers’ “naturally motivated associations” (Oszmianska 2001).

Onomatopoeia is universal in its existence, if not in terms of specific forms then at least as we naturally translate sounds we hear into our language’s phonetic vocabulary. In this way, insofar as language and culture interact to determine how we translate sounds we hear into language, onomatopoeia is culturally motivated. This is part of what makes learning a foreign sound symbolic system complicated – it requires cultural knowledge and a certain intuitive understanding of the phonetic system of the learned language.

Gitaigo, Japanese mimetics, are special. As a sub-category of sound symbolism these words are culturally motivated in their sounds, but since there are generally no actual sounds to hear, for non-native speakers to determine the semantic implications of sounds requires a deep cultural understanding. Indeed, even native speakers have trouble pinning down meanings. “[s]emantic definitions...are impossible to specify precisely...native speakers will have great difficulty in explaining the meaning of an ideophone” (Childs 1989). As suggested before this is perhaps due to the early childhood learning and resulting more basic understanding of these words. For non-native speakers

to develop a similar understanding, prolonged and varied exposure to sound symbolic words are indispensable.

Difficulties defining sound symbolic words in Japanese or translating them into other languages is unquestionably complicated by the semantic and phonetic relationship in sound symbolic words. Even if a word with equivalent meaning to a sound symbolic word were identified, without the same evocative sound characteristics would it really have the same meaning? The nuances of intrinsic sound meanings seem impossible to express in words and sounds besides the words themselves. The translator must “have some intuition about the similarity of phonological units across languages” (Li 2007). This is not only an intuition about the semantic nuances of sound units, but also about the way the sounds sound to native speakers. That is, the emotive qualities of the sounds.

Emotional language is not uncommon in Japanese. “Japanese has compact words that express the speaker’s emotional attitude and that offer easier access to encapsulate, express, and share feelings and attitudes” (Maynard 1997). *Gitaigo* and onomatopoeia in general are examples of these words. They make up descriptive language with a particularly visceral quality. Native Japanese speakers routinely describe sounds and movements as experiences rather than as events. An experience is personal. It happens to you. An event, on the other hand, encapsulates far less emotional involvement. It just happens. It follows, then, that sound symbolic words, with their capacity to express the speaker’s point of view so clearly and directly, are key to emotionally expressing sounds and movements. Perhaps this usage stems from the early learning and scaffolding role sound symbolic words play in language development, or perhaps it is an indication that understanding of sound symbolic meaning is in some way different from words made up

of arbitrary sounds. Regardless of the origin, this is further evidence of the key role sounds symbolic words play in culturally-aligned Japanese self-expression.

Sound units like *ga*, *bu* and *ru*, sound, to the Japanese ear, awkward and ugly. Is “eating greedily” an accurate translation of *gatsu-gatsu* given English speakers do not have the same semantic associations with the sounds making up *eating* and *greedily*? The syllables *ki* and *ko* sound light and beautiful to the Japanese ear. These syllables often occur in the questionably sound symbolic capacity of girls’ names. The sound associations from such names strengthen the semantic meaning for native speakers when these syllables occur in sound symbolic words. Is “glittering” an accurate translation of *kira-kira* given English speakers do not have the same semantic associations with the sounds making up *glittering*? Correspondences between sound and meaning that are likely not part of conscious linguistic knowledge in native speakers translate to intricate definitions of sound symbolic words. Defining these words must go beyond describing their meanings and possible situations for usage to getting at the emotional associations native speakers have with specific sound units. Similarly, learners of Japanese sound symbolism must work to understand not only the meaning of the words, but the emotional implications behind the meanings.

6. Teaching Sound Symbolism

The Sound Symbolic System of Japanese is a distinct linguistic element of the language and a key component to clear, vivid and natural communication in the language. As such, it is crucial for non-native language learners to receive effective instruction in these classes of words. I have suggested that it is not sufficient to simply memorize a list of commonly occurring sound symbolic words. In order to fully utilize the system,

language learners must develop an intuition of how to translate forms they see and sounds they hear into Japanese. How can Japanese teachers help their students develop this intuition? In this section I will discuss attitudes towards teaching the sound symbolic system based on personal experience as a Japanese language learner and an applied linguistic study.

My first formal introduction to sound symbolism, called *onomatope* - the English word transliterated into the Japanese phonetic system - was in a third year university Japanese class. The textbook reading my professor used as an introduction to the system lays out in clear and simple language the three categories of sound symbolism, *giseigo*, *giongo* and *gitaigo*, and asks us, the readers, if we had ever heard or used these “interesting words” (Miura and McGloin 1994).⁴ The reading offers an explanation for why these words are so prevalent in Japanese, suggesting that sound symbolism in Japanese stems from the ancient form of the language’s small number of verbs. Sound symbolic words used adverbially with the quotative particle *to* allowed for subtle and varied meanings to be expressed with a small number of verbs. No explanation is given as to why these words would have developed sound and form symbolically rather than with an arbitrary relationship between phonetic and semantic qualities.

The reading then presents a translation problem that alludes to the cultural influence on the situations, sounds and movements described by sound symbolic words in Japanese. In a famous comic by the “Father of Manga” Osamu Tezuka, the ideophonic word *shiiin* (with an extra-elongated /i/ vowel) accompanies a solemn scene of students seated silently in classroom rows, waiting for class to start. A sound symbolic word

⁴ Translation from the Japanese by the author.

describing a certain kind of silence! How can this be translated into other languages? In English, this *shiiin* was translated as *HMMMMM*, which carries the connotation of waiting, or thinking, but not of silence. In the Spanish edition, no translation was attempted and the image was printed without text. No text at all certainly carries the connotation of silence, but this strategy misses the sense of waiting. The state expressed by *shiiin* is inexpressible in these and many other languages in just one word; it is a testament to the compact vividness of sound symbolic words in general and Japanese speakers' unique view of the world. Using this ambiguous word as a key example of Japanese sound symbolism presents the system to students as something unique to Japanese, a little strange and far-fetched, and slightly out of reach of non-native speakers.

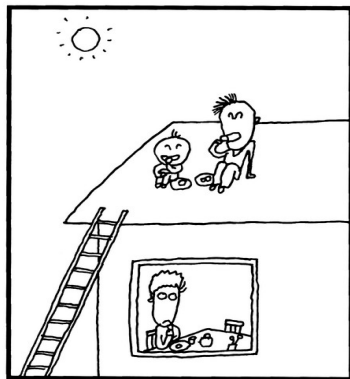
While the sound symbolic system of Japanese certainly is unique in its breadth and productivity and challenging for non-native speakers unaccustomed to such word usages, this presentation serves more to mystify than clarify. The mystification casts doubt on whether the average language learner can use these words effectively. Instead of emphasizing the strangeness of sound symbolic usage, showing the similarities to the language learner's native language and allowing the student to make connections with language they already understand would infuse language learners with confidence that they can master the system.

Introducing largely universal concepts within sound symbolism can aid understanding and show students how useful familiarity with sound symbolism can be. Giving examples of sound symbolism (animal noises, words like *crash* and *smash* in English), or words with relationships between sound and meaning (words like *bubble* and *gurgle* in English), in the students' native language provides scaffolding for

understanding more abstract sound symbolism: for instance, the words that describe states and feelings that make no sound in Japanese. Explicit instruction on similarities and differences between onomatopoeic words in the students' native language and Japanese sound symbolism can make the study of these words less overwhelming and more productive.

Explaining sound symbolism using comics as examples and images to illustrate definitions, as the reading described above did, is a useful way of presenting sound symbolic words to Japanese language learners. Many sound symbolic words are actually form symbolic. Visual representation of words helps students make connections between the sounds and shapes or movements. Viewing images that represent the sounds' meaning also subtly introduces the idea that students need to be open to learning to see the world from a Japanese point of view, and express themselves in Japanese based on this new viewpoint.

A dictionary of Japanese sound symbolic words with vivid illustrations (Gomi 1989) is one such useful teaching tool. An image like the one below, taken from Gomi's dictionary, provides language learners with a different avenue through which they can understand the meaning of the word, and a visual mnemonic aide.



waza waza (A) わざわざ
 ① Describes doing something on purpose, even though there is no need to. ② Describes doing something specially rather than incidentally. ③わざ
 ① そうする必要性がないのに、故意にするさま。② 何かのついでではなく、そのためだけにするさま。特別に、わざわざ。

The visual example gives learners an idea of the kind of situations in which this sound symbolic word can be used. The unlikely situation described in the image teaches learners that the word is flexible and can be used creatively. Visual learners especially will remember the humorous example and, by extension, the meaning of *waza-waza* (to go out of one's way to do something; doing something perverse and unnecessary). In the case of words that describe movement, a picture is additionally usually a more accurate and vivid definition than the written one.

Pictures are particularly well suited to teaching sound symbolism because they present the movement, situation or sound in the context of a kind of story. In the case of *waza-waza*, two people are gleefully going out of their way to eat on the roof. They are also possibly going out of their way to exclude the person inside who looks a little forlorn. We can wonder about the relationship between these people. Parents with conflicting standards of propriety and their child? A love triangle with one very left-out party? The picture emphasizes the whole situation that comes along with the use of *waza-waza*. It is a more holistic way of defining the word and thus better aligned with the way the word is used and understood by native speakers.

Pictorial definitions are not, however, without problems. Their major flaw is that pictures and illustrations can also contain cultural cues subject to misinterpretation. For example, in the same dictionary, Gomi defines *keba-keba* (garish or gaudy) with a picture of a woman wearing a feathered hat, jewelry, a dress and high-heeled shoes. To a Japanese eye, this might be a clear example of over-dressing but to someone from a place or culture where more outlandish fashions are common, this picture could be confusing.

While images can be useful in helping students to learn sound symbolic words, they can also add yet another layer of cultural assumptions that students must grapple with.

For most Japanese language learners studying outside of Japan, the classroom is the center of linguistic and cultural learning. Without other opportunities to interact in Japanese, students rely heavily on their instructors to provide them with the cultural and linguistic knowledge that will facilitate polite communication. Assuming that “language learning is not something that occurs in isolation, but is intimately related to the process of becoming a competent member of a society” (Ohta, 1991), language instructors have a responsibility to teach not only grammar, vocabulary and the like, but cultural communication as well.

Applied linguist Amy Ohta (1994) conducted a study comparing use of affective particles in a Japanese language classroom with use in average conversations between native speakers. She found far fewer occurrences and far less variety of affective particles— particles that express the speaker’s attitude towards their utterance (questioning, looking for agreement from the listener, presenting new and important information, surprise, presenting the utterance as common knowledge, etc.) – in the classroom compared with average conversations in bars, restaurants, living rooms, etc.

Affective particles are key to smooth communication in Japanese. One affective particle softens otherwise blunt statements of opinion that could make a speaker sound rudely aggressive. Another helps create rapport between speech partners by expressing a speaker’s desire for their statement or opinion to be confirmed or supported by their speech partner. The attitudes expressed by affective particles are particularly prized by Japanese society and culture, but they may not be as important to Japanese learners’

native cultures. Thus, the social lubrication accomplished by the use of these particles can only be appreciated when it is accompanied by a cultural understanding as to why these social attitudes are important. Sound symbolism is similarly grounded in Japanese culture and is similarly crucial for clear and comfortable communication in Japanese. Effective use of sound symbolism helps non-native speakers express themselves from a similar world-viewpoint as their Japanese speech partners and adds liveliness and vibrancy to their speech.

It is to be expected that a classroom cannot mimic the variety and complexity of the conversations of daily life. But it is telling that the aspects of language that are under-represented in Japanese classrooms are those that express information differently from the way the students' native language (e.g. English) does and that express subtle information that is nonetheless crucial to effective communication in Japanese. Information expressed by affective particles in Japanese is expressed through words like "right?" "you know," and "I mean" in English. In most English-speaking cultures, however, the nuance affective particles give to speech are not as important in social interactions. For example, in American culture we tend to express our blunt opinions without worrying too much about whether or not we sound too aggressive. Additionally, as argued in section 1, the nuances of movement and sound expressed by sound symbolism are often not considered crucial information to communication in English. Culture-specific communication must be taught not only in order for students to know how to use affective particles and sound symbolism, but also to appreciate the social ease and comfort afforded by effective use.

Without the use of affective particles and sound symbolism alike much of the nuances in communication are lost. The listener does not know how to “take” the speakers’ statement. Not only is the speech of a non-native speaker who misuses or does not use sound symbolic words dull-seeming to a native ear, the way they view an event, feel an emotion, or hear a sound is left unarticulated. Thus, in terms of their close cultural ties and significant difference in ways of expression from languages like English, from the point of view of language learners affective particles and sound symbolism are similar pieces of Japanese. Teaching affective particles and sound symbolism, then, require a similar emphasis on cultural learning combined with language learning.

Culturally appropriate communication goes along with cultural learning. When students come to understand what a normal social interaction is within Japanese culture and how communication differs from culture to culture, they can recognize and appreciate clear and mutually understandable communication when it happens. Teachers’ attitudes towards language learning and whether or not cultural information is a part of the curriculum plays a large role in whether or not students learn how to communicate meaningfully in the target language.

In a survey of the teachers she observed, Ohta found that teachers who saw their role as a language teacher as a teacher of Japanese culture in addition to grammar placed greater importance on students learning affective particles. As cultural learning becomes an important part of the curriculum, teachers focus on how people communicate in Japanese and how these norms might be different from those in their students’ native cultures. This kind of teaching mindset results in a greater emphasis on aspects of language like affective particles and sound symbolism that impart important cultural

information. Teachers who considered coherent communication, as opposed to mastery of grammar, vocabulary and characters, the primary goal of language study tended to use more affective particles in their teaching, thus exposing their students to appropriate use, even without explicit instruction (Ohta 1994). I expect that researchers would find similar results if this survey were repeated to find the correlation between teachers' attitudes and use of sound symbolism in the classroom.

Beyond explicit instruction, cultural or otherwise, exposure is key. In order to develop a clear understanding of the nuances of both affective particle and sound symbolism use, exposure to different types of usages in varying contexts, that is to everyday conversations and speech acts of average Japanese people, is just as important as formal instruction. Through prolonged and varied exposure to foreign linguistic concepts, intuition regarding proper usage develops.

Conclusion

Words classified as sound symbolic in Japanese are defined by their semantic and morphological categories as well as their syntactic usage and, of course, their most salient characteristic; meaning bearing sound units. Common usage of a widely occurring morphological category of sound symbolic words – the accentless reduplicative - with the quotative particle *to* and the verb *iu* (say) is syntactic evidence for the Japanese understanding that these words describe the sound that certain states or situations make, even when these emotional or physical states make no apparent sound. Although sound symbolism in Japanese is undoubtedly unique in many ways, some sound symbolic concepts may have a universal basis. For example, native speakers of languages as

phonetically diverse as English and Chinese recognize the generalization that low vowels describe bigger objects and high vowels describe small objects.

Studies testing the ability of Japanese children to isolate novel actions in sound symbolic and non-sound symbolic verbs show that sound symbolism is a scaffolding tool to help native speakers become more expressive in language earlier on in their development. The early importance of sound symbolism to language acquisition in native speakers highlights the impact of these words on shaping speakers' understanding of language in general. One challenge non-native language learners face in learning sound symbolism is developing the intuition needed to translate sounds heard and motions seen into the phonetic vocabulary of Japanese. Teachers can aid in the development of this intuition by making cultural learning and communication skills, in addition to grammar, vocabulary and character learning, focuses of the curriculum. This can be achieved both through passive exposure whereby the teacher uses sound symbolic words when she speaks to the class and through more explicit instruction, using pictures and texts to teach sound symbolic words. Both emphasizing the universality of sound symbolism and pointing out the differences between onomatopoeic words in the students' native languages and sound symbolism in Japanese can be useful ways to present this system to language learners.

Various strands interconnect language and culture. They influence each other in affecting both how people of a certain group express themselves and which aspects of the world that they see is emphasized and described in their speech. Sound symbolism is an aspect of Japanese with a strong cultural basis. Describing sounds and movements sound symbolically is evidence of a particular way of seeing and thinking about the world. In

order to effectively use sound symbolic words, language learners must not only translate sounds they hear and movements they see into the phonetic vocabulary of Japanese but also learn to see and hear the world in a distinctly Japanese way.

In this way, learning language is learning to think as well as to speak. Japanese language learners unused to sound symbolism, or from a culture that differs greatly from Japanese culture must learn to think in a new way as they study the language. It is a different kind of language than most non-native Japanese speakers are used to learning; one that communicates more directly and operates within a way of thinking about language that recognizes the importance of context and the human perspective for deriving meaning.

Since sound symbolism acts as a scaffolding tool for children acquiring Japanese, it follows that parents and other adults would use these kinds of words more with young children. This exposure develops their intuition about how sound and meaning interact in Japanese fairly early on in their language development. For non-native speakers, it takes time and prolonged, varied exposure to different sound symbolic forms in different contexts to develop a comparable intuition.

Teaching sound symbolism is an intersection of teaching language and culture. Teaching the culture in a foreign language class that corresponds to the target language is of course worthwhile for its own sake. But cultural instruction also enriches language instruction. Cultural norms inform appropriate behaviors, from simple things to removing shoes when entering a residence, to more complex ones like when and for how long eye contact between speech partners should be maintained. Just as culturally inappropriate behavior can make a friendship between a native and foreigner

uncomfortable and awkward, so can culturally inappropriate communication. Cultural norms also inform attitudes towards speech partners and communication in general. These culturally motivated attitudes include a view of communication whereby the speaker seeks to share their perspective with the speech partner rather than sharing information. At this point, cultural learning becomes linguistic learning. This attitude leads to an emphasis on expressing subtle nuances in sound, movement and emotion, as well as a need for a more direct means of expression. Sound symbolism fills both of these needs in Japanese.

It is important for sound symbolism to be taught in Japanese language classes not only because they are useful words with flexible meanings, pervasive throughout Japanese conversation, literature and business signage, but also for the sake of clear intercultural communication. Sound symbolic words represent differing cultural assumptions about the world between native and non-native Japanese speakers. Teaching these words to non-native speakers encourages students to understand the Japanese view and gives them the tools to do so.

Clear intercultural communication happens when people make an effort to understand conversations and the actions that surround them not from their own perspective, but from the perspective of the other culture. Understanding and being able to effectively use language like sound symbolic words that are not only deeply culturally motivated, but also indicative of the Japanese worldview can aid in this difficult task. As Wierzbicka (1997) points out, “even if we “translate” our thoughts from one language into another, we remain within the confines of a language.” Words like sound symbolism

that tie the language to the culture take communication in a foreign language out of pure translation realm and make it into a cultural experience.

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