Expressiveness in mimicry syntax: Quantitative evidence from Japanese and English

This paper quantitatively examines the correlation between the syntactic realization and morphological expressiveness of sound-symbolic, mimetic words in Japanese and English. Based on his field data in Swiwu, Dingemanse (2011: Ch. 6) points out that mimetics (“ideophones” in his terms) show more expressive features, such as vowel lengthening and prosodic foregrounding (see Zwicky & Pullum 1987), in their free forms (i.e., adverbial, attributive) than in their bound forms (i.e., adjectival, predicative) (see Akita & Matsumoto (forthc) for a similar observation). I pursue the crosslinguistic applicability of this proposal based on quantitative comparisons of predicative and non-predicative uses of Japanese and English mimetics in WebCorp (see Hundt et al. 2007).

The investigation was limited to “Quotative” constructions (J: -to-marked adverbial form; E: go-quotation) and Verbal constructions (J: su-incorporated form; E: simple verb form) (see Tamori & Schourup 1999). 212 Japanese geminate-ending mimetics (e.g., huwaQ ‘fluffy’) were taken from Kakueh et al. (1996), listed with their two common expressive counterparts: partially reduplicated (e.g., huwahuwaQ) and triplicated forms (e.g., huwahuwahuwaQ) (see Nasu 2002). 178 English onomatopoeic words (e.g., quack) were taken from Kloe (1977), expressivized by repetition (e.g., quack quack) and vowel lengthening (e.g., quaquad). Some actual instances are cited in (1) and (2).

(1) a. **NikonikoQ-to-si-ke kawairasii egao-no ko** ‘a girl with a cute beaming smile’ (V, reduplication)
   (http://www.geocities.jp/barsmoke_osaka/1-08-e003.htm)
   b. **nikonikonikoQ-to warau omago-san** ‘his’ grandchild who smiles beamingly’ (Q, triplication)
   (http://gendai.net/articles/view/kenko/136962)

(2) a. **wildflowers with a large stick that swoosh-swooshed through the air** (V, reduplication)
   (http://www.kevinkeating.blogspot.com/)
   b. **His robe went “swoooosh” and his hand pointed to…** (Q, vowel lengthening)

Table 1 shows the mean rates of verbal uses. Paired t-tests revealed that in both languages base forms are significantly more likely to appear as verbs than expressive forms (J: vs. reduplication: t (150) = 1.98, p < .05; vs. triplication: t (151) = 1.98, p < .001; E: vs. vowel lengthening: t (25) = 2.06, p < .01; vs. reduplication: t (41) = 2.02, p < .001). Moreover, particularly expressive forms (e.g., triplicated ones) were particularly frequently found in the non-predicative constructions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>base (huwaQ, quack)</th>
<th>vowel lengthening (quaquad)</th>
<th>reduplication (huwahuwauwaQ, quack quack)</th>
<th>triplication (huwahuwahuwahuwaQ)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>11.98%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>9.36%</td>
<td>2.74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(242,950,932)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(21,363,098)</td>
<td>(2,447,949)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>99.37%</td>
<td>59.83%</td>
<td>43.63%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(420,617,710)</td>
<td>(1,019)</td>
<td>(22,119)</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The results reinforce the grammatical relevance of expressive morphology. They allow us to modify Akita’s (2009) iconicity-based generalization of mimic syntax, in which mimetics with high lexical iconicity tend to be kept out of the clause core: for example, Japanese voice mimetics cannot be verbalized (e.g., *piyopiyosu- ‘tweet’). Assuming the extra-lexical nature of expressive morphology, the type of iconicity that is relevant to imetic syntax should not just be lexical. We also have to consider discourse-pragmatic motivations for different syntactic realizations of mimetics. This conclusion is consistent with the usage basis stressed in the current studies of mimetics (Dingemanse 2011). (482 words)
References