

What Does Mimetic Meaning Mean?

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The linguistic significance of Japanese mimetic words has increasingly been re-evaluated over the past 30 years, illuminating their implications to theoretical approaches—ranging from phonology, morphology, semantics, to language acquisition—as well as to the general way of viewing this word class. Japanese mimetic verbs—consisting of a mimetic base, which does not exhibit intrinsic categorial status on its own, and the light verb *suru* “do”—have raised a question of how their meaning should be captured, given that a mimetic base essentially symbolizes sound and manner, invoking pertinent images. One view is that the lexical semantic properties upon which the meaning and argument structure of a mimetic verb is built is no different from those of conventional lexical verbs (Kageyama 2007). Under this view, the meaning of a mimetic verb is assigned a finite number of definable senses and its argument structure is also restricted to limited possibilities to the same extent as conventional lexical verbs.

I will demonstrate several lexical semantic differences between mimetic verbs and conventional lexical verbs, and argue that meaning for mimetic verbs calls for a treatment distinct from that of lexical verbs. Taking into account the notion of “affect-imagistic dimension” (Kita 1997) in which a mimetic base is represented in terms of its images, I will argue that an analysis that incorporates the basic premise of frame semantics (Fillmore 1977; Goldberg 2010) along with the construction in which mimetic verbs occur can accommodate the seemingly idiosyncratic and unconventional lexical semantic properties of mimetic verbs. The wide range of semantic frames of mimetic verbs is thus fed by the numerous images of the mimetic base and the specific constructions in which they appear.