Describing motion events in L2 Japanese: Rolling, flying up and crashing

Mimetic words in Japanese are generally considered to be important for second language (L2) learners to acquire (e.g.,, Akimoto 2007; Makino and Tsutsui 1986) and a number of reference books have been published (e.g., Akutsu 1994; Hyuga and Hibiya 1989; Tomikawa 1997). However, very few studies have investigated L2 acquisition of mimetic words. Among the few are Sakurai (2003) and Iwasaki (2008), who examined the frequency of the use of mimetic words among Korean-speaking learners (and both Korean- and English-speaking learners in the case of Iwasaki 2008) of Japanese. They both used corpora of Oral Proficiency Interviews (OPI) and found that learners rarely used mimetic words unless their proficiency is at advanced or higher level. Iwasaki also found that in the majority of cases mimetic words were used either as adverbs (mimetic words alone or mimetic words followed by the quotative *to*) or mimetic verbs with *suru* (*gakkari suru* 'to be disappointed', *gerogero suru* 'to retch').

Because the questions and topics used in OPIs differ substantially across the proficiency levels of the interviewees, it is not clear whether the infrequent use by intermediate-level learners is at least partly due to the lack of contexts in which the use of mimetic words is called for. In the current study, 13 English-speaking and 21 Korean-speaking learners of Japanese described motion events that they watched on video clips (Tweety-bird animations). The analysis focuses on four events for which many of 21 Japanese native speakers, who also described the same clips, used highly mimetic words, with differing degrees of iconicity [lower to higher iconicity]: phenomime for rolling (manner of motion), flying up (manner of motion with sound effect associated with it), crashing (an event in which there is characteristic loud noise) and noise of a strike [at bowling alley]. According to Akita (2009a), whether the mimetic words can form mimetic verbs (without a childish effect) depends on the degree of iconicity. Highly iconic mimetic words cannot form verbs with the boundary falling on phenomimes for Japanese and Korean (i.e., relatively iconic phenomimes and more iconic phonomimes cannot form verbs but less iconic psychomimes can). Akita (2009b), however, modified his hypothesis to "highly iconic mimetics cannot function as head verbs" because Korean allows phenomimes to form verbs in nonfinite constructions utilizing *kelita* (indicating repetitive action).

It was found that some learners at Intermediate-Mid levels or above used mimetic words and that more Korean speakers used mimetic words, especially in the description of motion events. Interestingly, both English and Korean speakers used the phenomime(s) as verbal predicates but with different semantics. The English speaker's mimetic verb in (1) seems to conflate manner and path of motion while the Korean speaker's in (2) is restricted to manner, as shown.

(1) English speaker (Advanced-Low):

Korokoro korokoro site, de, sono shita-ni saka-ga arimasita.
mimetic (rolling)   do-GER and that below-LOC slope-NOM exist-PAST

Neko-ga booringuzyo-ni koron-to site, doon.
cat-NOM bowling.alley-to mimetic-quotative do-GER mimetic

(2) Korean speaker (Intermediate-Mid):

gorogoro sinagara   booringuzyo-ni hairimasu.
mimetic (rolling) do.while   bowling.alley-to enter- NONPAST

The results suggest that both English and Korean learners seemed to favor the use of highly iconic mimetic words as predicates rather than adverbs, but the meanings English and Korean speakers impose on the mimetic verbs can differ.

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