

Japanese Mimetic Words as Metalinguistic Reformulation:

Redefining the Definition

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1. Introduction: Language of Mimicry

Onomatopoeia and mimetic words are often said to be one of the most prominent features of the Japanese language. Additionally, they are difficult to translate, especially into English, which has fewer onomatopoeic and mimetic expressions than Japanese does. As Inose (2008) puts it, “the peculiarity of these expressions, especially the mimetic word that does not exist in Spanish or English, causes the utmost difficulty for foreigners learning Japanese” (Inose (2008: 97)). Among the possible solutions is understanding the precise definitions of onomatopoeias and mimetic words. Thus, this paper aims to propose new convincing definitions of them from a pragmatic point of view. Metarepresentational aspects of these expressions are focused on, borrowing the notion of descriptive and interpretive uses of language to clarify the difference.

The outline of the remainder of this paper is as follows. Section 2 presents general definitions given to Japanese onomatopoeic and mimetic expressions in the literature and then highlights some ambiguities. Section 3 provides an explanatory overview of metarepresentation including two types of metarepresentational language uses for further analysis in the next section. Section 4 attempts to redefine Japanese onomatopoeic and mimetic expressions as examples of metarepresentation, and the reason for the abundance of these types of expressions in the Japanese language is also suggested.

2. Onomatopée or Onomatopoeia

2.1. Scope of Japanese *Onomatope*

The Japanese language contains expressions called *onomatope* (onomatopoeic and mimetic expressions, or ideophone, オノマトペ). This term is derived from the French word *onomatopée* (onomatopoeia) and adopted to have an additional meaning of mimetic words later as a Japanese word.¹ Notably, the Japanese term *onomatope* and the English term onomatopoeia differ, although they both look and sound similar. While Japanese *onomatope* includes both onomatopoeic and mimetic expressions, English onomatopoeia usually does not include mimetic ones. In discussing Japanese *onomatope*, this complexity first needs to be organized. The relation is summarized as follows.

(1) Japanese *Onomatope* and English Onomatopoeia

onomatope (*onomatopée*, オノマトペ) — *giongo* (onomatopoeia, 擬音語)
— *gitaigo* (mimetic word, 擬態語)

As aforementioned, Japanese *onomatope* comprises *giongo* and *gitaigo* and thus differs from the English term onomatopoeia. Why is the comprehensive term of the two, *onomatope*, needed to express onomatopoeias and mimetic words collectively? Is merely saying *giongo* or *gitaigo* respectively sufficient?² Examples (2–4) illustrate answers to these questions.³ All translations and underlines in this paper are those of the author unless otherwise indicated.

(2) *Dakuryū ga gōgō to nagarete iru.*

濁流がごうごうと流れている。(Ono (2007: 8))

The muddy stream flows roaring.

(3) *Nokorimono o renji de chin shite ne.*

残り物をレンジでチンしてね。

Please zap the leftovers in the microwave.

(4) *Atari wa shin to natta.*

辺りはシーンとなった。

The world around fell into complete silence.

In (2–4), the distinction between *giongo* and *gitaigo* cannot easily be made. For example, *gōgō* in (2) describes the sound of rapidly moving muddy stream, especially after heavy rain. However, without hearing its actual sound, *gōgō* can be used as a mimetic word to convey that the river stream is running fiercely. In (3), the word *chin* expresses the bell sound of a microwave oven that signals when the cooking is finished. However, recently, the alarm sound has changed to *pīpī* or short melodies. Despite the case that the word *chin* does not describe the real sound, Japanese speakers can say *chin suru* (to zap, チンする) conventionally and understand the meaning correctly. In this sense, whether *chin* is an example of onomatopoeias or mimetic words depends on the degree of conventionality.

(4) seems to be an example of mimetic words because the word *shin* is used to express the state of “dead calm” (Mizuno (ed.) (2016: 13)). This is, however, not a mimetic word but an onomatopoeic word. It goes without saying that the state of complete silence has no sounds. According to Takara (2014), in complete silence, people can hear “the sound of silence,” that is, the sound of tinnitus, or inner noise, due to a physiological and/or psychological conditions (Takara (2014: 11–12)). This subtle sound is heard as *shin* to express silence by Japanese speakers.

The examples in (2–4) disclose the blurry borderline between onomatopoeias and mimetic words. Thus, the collective term *onomatope* must be used for both onomatopoeias and mimetic words.⁴ However, from a pragmatic point of view, a clear distinction between the two might be possible. Before discussing this topic, let us have an overview of the general definitions of Japanese *giongo* and *gitaigo*.

2.2. Definitions of Onomatopoeia and Mimetic Word

Inose (2008) suggests, as quoted in the introductory part of this paper, that English has no *gitaigo* or mimetic words in its language system. This

character can be an obstacle for English speakers to understanding Japanese *onomatope*. However, even for Japanese native speakers who use the Japanese language as their primary language, the distinction between *giongo* and *gitaigo* is dubious. Even though “Japanese native speakers can relatively easily distinguish between *onomatope* and other vocabulary” (Tamori & Schourup 1999: 5), selecting the category of *onomatope*, that is, deciding whether an expression falls into *giongo* or *gitaigo*, causes confusion as illustrated in (2-4). A lot of definitions of Japanese onomatopoeic and mimetic expressions have been presented, but a definitive one remains unclear. Take definitions in (5) and (6) for example.

(5) *giongo* (onomatopoeia, 擬音語)

- a. Words that represent the sound of things or voices by fitting them into the Japanese sound system

(Yamaguchi (2015: 4), translation mine)

- b. “A language of sound” (Ushiro (2005: 18), translation mine)

- c. ... any words that imitate real sounds, be they human or animal voice or otherwise (Inose (2008: 98))

(6) *gitaigo* (mimetic word, 擬態語)

- a. Words that represent the state or condition of things as if they were plausible by fitting them into the Japanese sound system

(Yamaguchi (2015: 1), translation mine)

- b. “Language of state or condition” (Ushiro (2005: 19), translation mine)

- c. Words that phonetically express states that do not produce sounds, such as an emotion, a movement or state of things (Inose (2008: 98))

According to the definitions in (5), *giongo* expresses sounds by imitating them within the system of the language used, which is Japanese in this case. On the other hand, *gitaigo* are less comprehensible than *giongo* are. As shown in (6), *gitaigo* expresses the state or condition as if the sounds were actually heard. Then, is it possible to judge whether they are acceptable as sound expressions or not? In other words, the source sound of *gitaigo* cannot be

proved. In this sense, *gitaigo* again seems highly conventional. This unperceivability of the source sounds leads to confusion regarding the definition of *gitaigo*. Thus, this paper explains this aspect of mimetic words more in detail and redefines mimetic words in a manner more persuasive than that in the previous literature. The tools or technical notions available for this attempt are overviewed in the next section.

3. Metarepresentation and Reformulation

3.1. Metarepresentation and Types of Language Use

As suggested, *gitaigo* conveys feelings or interpretations of the things expressed, and *giongo* directly represents real sounds. They both mention or represent something else other than themselves. This aspect of representation is explained within the notion of metarepresentation. Below is the definition of metarepresentation from the viewpoint of Relevance Theory, a theory of pragmatics.

- (7) A metarepresentation is a representation of a representation: a higher-order representation with a lower-order representation embedded within it. (Wilson (2000: 230))

As a technical term, metapresentation is used for the complex multilayered aspect of communication. It can, however, also be applied to individual terms such as *giongo* and *gitaigo*.⁵ Regarding Japanese *giongo* or onomatopoetic expressions, a lower-order representation is the mental representation of the source sounds they depict. This mental representation is metarepresented by a higher order representation *giongo* or onomatopoeias.

On the other hand, devising a definition of *gitaigo* is more difficult than doing it for *giongo* because the former does not represent actual sounds. Then, what does *gitaigo* metarepresent? The first clue lies in the distinction between the descriptive and interpretive uses of language also proposed by Relevance Theory. Summarizing these two aspects of language use, originally advocated by Sperber & Wilson (1995), Smith (2000) provided the following articulate explanation.

- (8) In descriptive use, (a) the thought belongs to the speaker and (b) the speaker intends it to accurately represent reality. In interpretive use, (a) the thought belongs (originally) to someone other than the speaker and (b) the speaker intends his/her utterance to accurately represent the original thought. Someone speaking descriptively intends to be faithful to reality; someone speaking interpretively intends to be faithful to the meaning of the original speaker. (Smith (2000: 39))

The distinction above can be applied to that between *giongo* and *gitaigo* shown by the examples in Figures 1 and 2. The translations added below each picture are also taken from Mizuno (ed.) (2016).



goro goro / pikat



Wagaya wa kanari **gata** ga kiteru ne...
(My house has become quite old and rickety)
gishi gishi

Figure 1 (Mizuno (ed.) (2016: 8))

Figure 2 (Mizuno (ed.) (2016: 23))

Mizuno (ed.) (2016) explains that *gorogoro* in Figure 1 is “[t]he sound of thunder” and *pikat* “[d]escribes something flashing” (Mizuno (ed.) (2016: 8)). The former is a type of *giongo* or onomatopoeia, and the latter is a mimetic word. Similarly, *gishi gishi* is an example of onomatopoeia, and *gata* in Figure 2 is used as a mimetic word. The onomatopoeia *gishigishi* means “[a] creaking or grating sound of a relatively heavy object,” and *gata* is used to show “a situation in which fixture and fittings have deteriorated and doors, for example, no longer open and close smoothly” (Mizuno (ed.) (2016: 23)). Among

these four examples of *onomatope*, *goro goro* and *gishi gishi* imitate the real sounds which one can actually hear. In other words, they are what Smith (2000) mentions as “faithful to reality” (Smith (2000: 39)). The mimetic words *pikat* and *gata*, on the other hand, do not copy sounds because there exists no source sound. Thus, they are “faithful to the meaning” (Smith (2000: 39)).

Gitaigo is an example of interpretive use because it does not imitate real sounds but represents the interpretation of the state of an object by assuming patterns similar to those of *gitaigo*. In this sense, *gitaigo* represents the state or condition indirectly and thus can have a higher level metarepresentation than *giongo*. This aspect of *onomatope* is examined again later.

3.2. Patterns of Reformulation

The second clue is the concept of reformulation or rewording. Blakemore (2007) points out that there are two types of reformulation: metalinguistic and metaconceptual ones. According to Blakemore (2007), “while *or* introduces a meta-linguistic reformulation, *that is* introduces a meta-conceptual reformulation” (Blakemore (2007: 332)).

(9) The bassoon, or hautbois, as they say in French, is my favourite instrument. (Blakemore (2007: 336))

(10) Ruby said that she, that is Scarlett, is going to get the job. (Blakemore (2007: 336))

In (9), hautbois is a French word for bassoon and an English alternative is provided by *or* parenthetical. On the other hand, (10) is an example of metaconceptual reformulation, where *that is*-parenthetical identifies who “she” refers to. This contributes to identifying the conceptual content of the word “she.” In summary, the word *or* provides alternative expressions, while *that is* provides an explanation or interpretation of the word that precedes.

Figure 3 is a simple tree diagram which can explain the distinction between *giongo* and *gitaigo* in the sphere of metarepresentation.

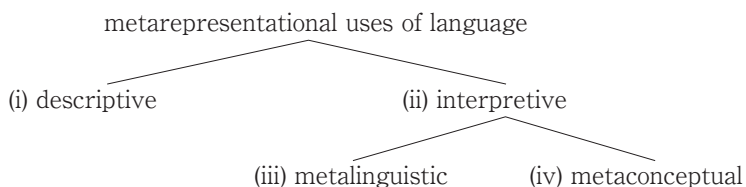


Figure 3 Uses of Language and Metarepresentation⁶

As stated in 3.1, the use of *giongo* or onomatopoeia is regarded as a descriptive use of language. Both describe the mental representation of real sounds as closely as they can within the sound system of the language used. On the other hand, *gitaigo* express the state or condition that has no sound by pretending itself to express real sounds.

Regarding this metalinguistic and metaconceptual distinction, *gitaigo* naturally falls into the metalinguistic category. Basically, *gitaigo* do not provide any explanation of the concept or the content by reformulating other linguistic expressions. *Gitaigo* merely conveys feelings by combining linguistic sounds into a word. In this sense, *gitaigo* or mimetic words cannot be categorized as metaconceptual representation. However, this cannot be a convincing reason to include *gitaigo* in an example of metalinguistic use of language. To be metalinguistic, an expression must reformulate other words or phrases. In the next section, the reason why *gitaigo* is an example of metalinguistic use is discussed further.

4. Redefining Memetic Words: Hearing the Sound Unheard

4.1. Compatibility between Onomatopoeia and Mimetic Word

If *giongo* represent or mimic real sounds, what do *gitaigo* represent? In 3.2., it is proposed that the category for *gitaigo* is the metalinguistic use of language. If this is the case, *gitaigo* must metarepresent other linguistic expressions. To explain this, the following three points are discussed in this section.

- (11) a. Incompatibility between *giongo* and *gitaigo*
- b. Etymology without any connection to sound

c. Pattern mimicking to mock sounds

(11a) is the most fundamental aspect of *gitaigo*. If *gitaigo* makes use of phonetic expressions to represent a certain state or condition as can be seen from (6), it can also make use of *giongo*. Thus, all *gitaigo* instances should share their usage with *giongo*. However, some instances of *gitaigo* cannot be used as *giongo*, unlike examples (2) or (4).

- (12) a. *Hakuchō ga batabata to habataita.*

白鳥がバタバタと羽ばたいた。

The swan beat its wings.

- b. *Batabata shite ite okuremashita.*

バタバタしていて遅れました。

I am late because I am very busy.

The *onomatope batabata* in (12) can be used as both *giongo* and *gitaigo*. As Kakei & Tamori (1993) points out, “some *giongo* can also be used as *gitaigo*” (Kakei & Tamori 1993: iii). On the other hand, as illustrated in (13) and (14), there are some *onomatope* that cannot be used as both.

- (13) *Kare wa tantan to shigoto o konashita.*

彼は淡々と仕事をこなした。

He worked in a matter-of-fact way.

- (14) *Nerumae ni sake o chibichibi to nonda.*

寝る前に酒をちびちびと飲んだ。

I sipped my sake before bed.

The *gitaigo tantan* and *chibichibi* in the examples above cannot be used as Japanese onomatopoeia. In these cases, the expressions used for *gitaigo* are not always those for sound. Some words are used for both *giongo* and *gitaigo*, while others are exclusively used for either *giongo* or *gitaigo*. This incompatibility leads to the hypothesis that *gitaigo* is a type of metalinguistic use of

language, as explained in the next part of this paper.

4.2. Etymology Without any Connection to Sound

Some Japanese mimetic words are derived from words that do not represent any sounds as examples in (15) illustrate.

- (15) a. *Kare wa mokumoku to shigoto o konashita.*

彼は黙々と仕事をこなした。

He worked hard and silently.

- b. *Yoreyore no syatsu ni airon o kaketa.*

ヨレヨレのシャツにアイロンをかけた。

I ironed my wrinkled shirt.

- c. *Sono inu no shippo wa fusafusa da.*

その犬の尻尾はふさふさだ。

The tail of the dog is bushy.

The underlined expressions in (15) are examples of Japanese mimetic words. All of them are exclusively used as *gitaigo*; they cannot be used as *giongo*. The reason is that *gitaigo* in (15a) is derived from the word 黙(*moku*, silence), that in (15b) is from 撚れ(*yore*, twist), and that in (15c) is from 房(*fusa*, tussock). By duplicating the expressions as can be seen in the frequent patterns of *giongo*, they can be recognized as *gitaigo*. Although these expressions do not originally represent real sounds, they are fitted into the pattern similar to that of *giongo*, leading them to be categorized as *onomatope*.

Examples of *gitaigo* with a further unique origin are in (16).

- (16) a. *Kanojyo wa chayahoya sareru no ga kirai da.*

彼女はちやほやされるのが嫌いだ。

She hates being pampered.

- b. *Kondo no ryokō ga tanoshimi de wakuwaku suru.*

今度の旅行が楽しみでわくわくする。

I am really excited about the upcoming trip.

Regarding the underlined *gitaigo chiyahoya* in (16a), its origin is widely believed to be 蝶や花や (*chō ya hana ya*, like butterflies and flowers) (Nikkei (ed.) (2014: 20-21), and *wakuwaku* in (16b) is from 湧く (*waku*, to flow out) (Yamaguchi (ed.) (2015: 577)).⁷ The former example of a mimetic word is used to express petting an object in a way how one deals with delicate and pretty things such as butterflies and flowers. In the latter example, *wakuwaku* means that something good and comfortable is flowing out from one's heart, making this word imply getting positive feelings toward something.

As mentioned above, among the Japanese mimetic words are expressions without any relationship with real sounds. Instead of mimicking real sounds, *gitaigo* mimic other words or phrases. Despite their similar appearance, *giongo* and *gitaigo* differ. In summary, *giongo* metarepresent real sounds in the real world, whereas *gitaigo* represent linguistic expressions. To be *gitaigo*, a word or an expression must have Japanese onomatopoeic patterns.⁸ Hence, superficially, *giongo* and *gitaigo* are similar. However, *gitaigo* does not descriptively represent the feelings of the object; it reformulates other expressions already metarepresented by others. In that sense, *gitaigo* can be one example of metalinguistic representation.

4.3. Pattern Mimicking to Mock Sounds

An elementary but essential aspect of *onomatope* is as follows: to be categorized into *onomatope*, *giongo* and *gitaigo* must share features distinguishable from those of other linguistic expressions. Then, what are the definitions of *giongo* and *gitaigo*? According to the definitions introduced in section 2, the only commonality observed is the simple fact that they express something.

In this paper, it is suggested that the pattern and the object of the representation are clues to devising convincing definitions. The proposed definitions are in (17).

(17) a. *giongo* (Japanese onomatopoeias, 擬音語)

Words that descriptively represent real sounds within the rules of the language used and patterns of distinguishable feature

b. *gitaigo* (Japanese mimetic words, 擬態語)

Words that interpretively represent the state or condition borrowing the pattern of onomatopoeias; they metarepresent other linguistic expressions putting them into the pattern that are shared with onomatopoeias

Most researchers have argued that the distinction between *giongo* and *gitaigo* is no more available. However, if an accurate definition can be devised, the importance of the distinction between *giongo* and *gitaigo* should be reevaluated, leading to make one notice the abundance and diversity of the Japanese language.

5. Conclusion: Mimic to Metarepresentation

This paper aims to redefine Japanese onomatopoeias and mimetic words from a pragmatic point of view, providing only a basis for further research on the Japanese *onomatope*. Onomatopoeias and mimetic words have many intriguing features. For example, they are far more productive than other language devices. Nevertheless, when reading or hearing unknown onomatopoeia and mimetic words, they can be understood.

The mimetic word *gyōn* in Figure 4 is uncommon such that Japanese native speakers might never have used them. However, readers of this manga can understand its meaning with the help of sound symbolism.⁹ First, readers of this manga see these letters. They notice that these compose a word, not the background picture. Next, some patterns are extracted to classify the word type and determine how they can be interpreted. If they are completely new expressions and they exhibit the pattern of *onomatope*, readers attempt to understand them by applying some patterns of sound symbolism used in Japanese. Figure 5 is a translated version of Figure 4. Here, the common expression “Ta-dah” is used. From these two figures, an interesting aspect of the onomatopoeia, the difference of the degree of creativity between Japanese and English can be suggested for further research.

The above process can be explained by the difference between *giongo*



(Gotoge 2020: 22)

Figure 4 *Gyōn*



(Gotoge 2021: 22)

Figure 5 TA-DAH

and *gitaigo*. As stated, whether a certain type of expression is *onomatope* or not depends on the linguistic pattern, and this is also true for a newly devised expression. As far as they follow the pattern of *onomatope*, they can be interpreted as *onomatope*, that is, onomatopoeias and/or mimetic words. The pattern is a clue, and the content is symbolized. Mimetic words do not mimic sounds, but the patterns of onomatopoeias. Beyond merely providing definitions, it can be applied to how individuals can understand and interpret the unknown.

Notes

- 1 According to Akita (2021), originally, the French word *onomatopée* means onomatopoeia. Through the process of borrowing, the Japanese term *onomatope* obtain an additional meaning of mimetic words (Akita (2021: 50)).
- 2 However, outside the research context, the distinction still exists. It is because, as Nakazato (2017) states, “whether the object they represent is sound or not might be concerned” (Nakazato (2017: 25)).
- 3 Examples in this paper are written by the author unless otherwise stated. All examples are carefully composed through a close consultation with dictionaries and Japanese native speakers.
- 4 In addition to these points, many authors adopt the collective term *onomatope* instead of using *giongo* or *gitaigo* individually for different reasons. For example, Kakei & Tamori (1993) mentions that the degree of the applicability of *giongo* to *gitaigo* differs from language to language. To avoid misunderstanding, the collective term *onomatope* is chosen (Kakei & Tamori (1993: iii)). Ono (ed.) (2007) uses the word *onomatope* rather than *giongo* and *gitaigo* “to avoid

unnecessary terminological confusion” (Ono (ed.) (2007: 9)). Nakamura (2017) states that the terminology is complicated because *giongo* sometimes mean both onomatopoeic expressions and mimetic words in Japanese (Nakamura (2017: iv)). In addition, Nakazato (2017) points out that a clear distinction between *giongo* and *gitaigo* is difficult due to their sensuous and symbolic nature (Nakazato (2017: 26)).

- 5 According to Wilson (2000), the concept of metarepresentation can be applied to various aspects of language including individual words (Wilson (2000: 413)).
- 6 Although the types of metarepresentation suggested by relevance theorists are more complicated and detailed as partly summarized in Shiota (2018), for the clarity of explanation, this paper presents a simplified diagram.
- 7 Although this origin is controversial, many Japanese speakers believe it true. The folk etymological aspect of *chihayoya* is pointed out by Look wise (2022).
- 8 Although it is indispensable, this paper does not examine the pattern because the main aim is to present the availability of the distinction between *giongo* and *gitaigo*. One of most comprehensive and convincing study on the sound symbolic aspects and the structure of onomatopoeias and mimetic words is Hamano (2019).
- 9 Sakurai (2010) regards onomatopoeia as “an expression of shared feelings” by which people can capture various senses at a time (Sakurai (2010: 10-11)). Tanimoto (2014) refers to *giongo* and *gitaigo* as shared understanding of the image the object has (Tanimoto (2014: 137)). These observations also lead to research on sound symbolism. Imai & Haryu (2014) suggest that in addition to understand the sound symbolism, acquiring implicit distinctive rules that combines sounds and meanings is necessary (Imai & Haryu (2014: 223)).

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