Mimetic verbs and meaning

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This paper will discuss several lexical semantic differences between mimetic verbs and conventional prosaic verbs in Japanese, and show 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 and construction grammar 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.

Keywords: mimetic verbs, reduplication, polysemy, frame semantics, construction grammar.

1. Introduction

It seems undeniably true that we understand a lexical item to represent a form-meaning pairing as its linguistic property. Such association, however, may be obscured when we consider what constitutes the meaning of mimetic words, which serve as descriptive expressions. Like many languages, Japanese has an extensive set of mimetic words, and based on its phonological, prosodic, and morphological characteristics, this word class has been shown to form a lexical stratum independent of – although overlapping with – other classes that include native words, Sino-Japanese words, and other loanwords. So-called ‘meaning’ of mimetics may seem illusive as what they refer to are often sounds, texture, intensity, and the like, that are symbolic of individuals and entities in nature; on the other hand, many of them have been conventionalized with quite specific “meanings” on a par with non-mimetic lexical nouns like tamago “egg” and verbs such as taberu “eat”. In this paper I will focus on the verb form of mimetic words, and demonstrate that mimetic verbs exhibit a set of properties different from that of non-mimetic lexical verbs or ‘prosaic’ verbs (‘language’s normal lexicon,’ Newman 2001: 251). Mimetic verbs are most commonly constructed by suffixing the light verb
suru to a mimetic base: examples include chin-suru “to microwave”, hotto-suru “be relieved”, and dokidoki-suru ‘be nervous’, among many more.

In Tsujimura (2003, 2005; also 2010) I argued for a construction approach in explaining meaning and argument structure of mimetic verbs. In it I took the position that the polysemy, or even a potentially indefinite number of senses, associated with a mimetic verb is accounted for by globally capturing the iconic images of a mimetic base together with the nature of the construction in which the mimetic verb appears. Kageyama (2007) argues against this position, claiming that the lexical semantic analysis of mimetic verbs should be no different from that of prosaic verbs. I will not detail Kageyama’s analysis here, but the core of his argument is that the nature of the semantic characterization and the representation is the same for mimetic verbs as it is for prosaic verbs; and the lexical representation of the light verb suru and that of the mimetic word are fully integrated.

Many instances of ‘specific’ meanings of mimetic verbs, for which Kageyama’s analysis is motivated, are mostly, if not all, conventionalized and fossilized. This is evidenced by the fact that not only mimetic dictionaries but standard Japanese dictionaries list those meanings as their definitions. As long as a particular sense – or senses – together with its argument structure property is invariably designated for a mimetic verb, I agree with Kageyama in the unified analysis for mimetic and prosaic verbs. Nevertheless, I wish to stress that as one of the hallmarks of the mimetic stratum, mimetic verbs – and more generally mimetic words – exhibit a high degree of extension to innovative meanings and a relative freedom of argument structure possibilities, far beyond the level to which prosaic verbs have access. It is my goal to demonstrate the importance of observing a wide range of meanings and argument structure patterns with which a given mimetic verb is and can be associated. Furthermore, I will show additional characteristics of mimetic verbs that motivate a way of capturing what ends up being the meaning of a mimetic verb more globally than Kageyama’s analysis would.

2. Creative and innovative uses

We start by observing creative and innovative uses of mimetic words that may help our understanding of mimetic verbs in our later discussion. It is well known that Japanese comic books are full of innovative sound symbolic expressions, but innovative mimetic words and innovative meaning assignments to a conventional mimetic word are amply attested in literary works as well. Tamori (2002), for instance, demonstrates such cases, as in (1), citing the literary works by Kenji Miyazawa, who is a celebrated author of children’s books and poetry. The definitions of munya-munya, peka-peka, pin-pin, and zaku-zaku, taken from Kakehi, Tamori & Schourup (1996: 114, 117, 118), are given below the examples.
The mimetic word in (1a), *monya-monya*, seems to be Miyazawa's creation, and a similar sounding mimetic form *munya-munya* would be more conventionally expected to describe the mumbling speech that is depicted in (1a). The prevalent mimetic words in (1b-d) are used with innovative senses in these contexts. For example, in (1c), *pyon-pyon*, rather than *pin-pin*, is more commonly used to describe the manner of dancing, but as Tamori explains, although *pin-pin* is often used to depict a vigorous movement of fresh fish and is not expected to describe the manner of dancing, the writer Miyazawa seems to have chosen *pin-pin* to refer to the rabbit's energetic and joyful dancing to enrich the descriptive effectiveness in an imaginative world of fiction. The examples in (1) demonstrate that what seems eccentric in Miyazawa's choice of mimetic words mirrors his creative rhetorical purpose. They further reflect the way in which Miyazawa uniquely visualizes and conceptualizes a mimetic word vis-à-vis a particular scene. Importantly, even the speakers who find (1) awkward can easily imagine what those described scenes are like.

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1. Similarly, in (1b), *pika-pika* would be an expected descriptor for shining light, but Tamori observes that Miyazawa opted for *peka-peka* to express less glittering than what *pika-pika* typically symbolizes.
Turning our attention to our primary concern of mimetic verbs, we continue to observe the flexibility in interpretation of existing mimetic verbs beyond conventional meanings, as well as the flexibility in the range of argument structure with which a mimetic verb is associated. It will be made clear that the relative freedom in meaning and argument structure separates mimetic verbs from prosaic verbs. The first mimetic verb to consider is *gacha-gacha-suru*. The mimetic dictionary lists only the definition of the mimetic base, *gacha-gacha*, as in (2). Examples with the mimetic verb *gacha-gacha-suru* are given in (3–7).

(2) *gacha-gacha*: the clattering or rattling sound made by relatively thin metallic or ceramic objects knocking together repeatedly; the sound of an adding machine or similar mechanical device (KTS: 353)

(3) *doa-nobu-o gacha-gacha-suru nante motte-no-hoka*  
door-knob-ACC <mimetic> out of question  
“It is out of the question to move a door knob in a *gacha-gacha* way.”

(4) *hai-o otosu rebaa-ga tsuiteite, haiotoshi-no*  
ashes-ACC drop lever-NOM attached ash-dropping-GEN  
koto-o “*gacha-gacha-suru*”-tte ittemashita.  
that-ACC <mimetic>-quotative is called  
Kodomo-ni-wa *gacha-gacha-suru*-no-ka kekkoo omoshirokatta-n-desu.  
children-to-top <mimetic>-that-NOM very is fun  
“It accompanies a lever with which you can let the ashes fall, and dropping the ashes is called ‘doing *gacha-gacha*’. Doing *gacha-gacha* is fun for children.”

(5) *XX-sensei-to hutari-de gacha-gacha-site-ita-n-desu kedo...*  
XX-prof.-with two-be <mimetic> but  
“I was *gacha-gacha*-ing with Prof. XX, but...”

(6) *heya-de gacha-gacha-no kapuseru-o niyaniya-shi-room-in <mimetic-Noun>-GEN capsule-ACC grinning-do-nagara aketeitara, haha-ni “anata sono toshi-de*  
while was opening mother-by “you that age-at  
*gacha-gacha-suru*-no”-to akireraramashita.  
<mimetic-Verb>-Q”-quotative amazed  
“With a smile on my face, I was opening the capsule of *gacha-gacha* in my room, and then my mother was amazed by saying ‘you do *gacha-gacha* at your age!’”

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2. Conventional meanings and their examples are mostly taken from the primary mimetic dictionary, Kakehi, Tamori & Schourup (1996); and additional data are found in my internet search and also in actual daily conversations.
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(7) GF-wa rinku-saito-ni gentei-shite gacha-gacha-suru 
GF-top link-site-at is limited <mimetic> node..... soshite sorezore betsuni gacha-gacha-suru-koto-mo dekimasu. 

because... and each separate <mimetic>-that-also can “As for GF, gacha-gacha-ing is limited to the link site, ... and each of you can gacha-gacha separately.”

(3) reflects the conventional meaning of (2) most directly, referring to the sound made by the movement of a door-knob, which commonly is metallic. The rest of the examples demonstrate various degrees of departure from the definition in (2). The mimetic verb gacha-gacha-suru as is used in (4) is defined specifically in this particular context as clearing ashes out of some kind of stove by moving a lever back and forth. That is, the mimetic verb in (4) refers to a caused motion with an exact and concrete set of specific object, instrument, manner, and purpose. (5) occurred in natural speech uttered by my colleague at the university, and sounded to me totally innovative and initially even odd although I figured the exact sense of gacha-gacha-suru that she intended to convey: the mimetic verb in this context refers to some chaotic situation such as doing odds-and-ends that lack organization. Of this set of examples, (6–7) depart most from the conventional meaning of gacha-gacha-suru. The base, gacha-gacha, is a noun in the first occurrence in (6), referring to a toy that is popular among young people; and the verb gacha-gacha-suru means to play with this toy gacha-gacha. Due to its popularity, blog sites and chat rooms have been created to exchange information about the toy and related activities, which are referred to as gacha-gacha-suru, as in (7). Contrastive to the conventional meaning given in (2), the sense of the same mimetic verb that is used in (6–7) is the one that additionally requires the information about what the noun gacha-gacha stands for and about the social background in which gacha-gacha, whether as a noun or as a part of a verb, is understood in a specific community of internet users.

These examples demonstrate that mimetic verbs receive a wide range of interpretations, from a conventionalized meaning to an innovative and creative sense that often relies on pragmatic conventions for a specific interpretation. This aspect of meaning that mimetic verbs have is shared by innovative verbs in Japanese, as is discussed in Tsujimura & Davis (2011), and many of the English denominal verbs to which Clark & Clark (1979) refer as contextuals.

The second set of examples, given in (10–14), shows that the degree of flexibility in interpretation observed in (3–7) further extends to argument structure patterns. We will discuss this based on bata-bata-suru. The mimetic dictionary lists the conventionalized meaning of (8).

(8) bata-bata-suru: to make a flapping or rattling noise (KTS: 46)

(9) Ami-ni haitta yatsu [anago]-wa ... bata-bata-suru-kara net-in entered conger eel-top <mimetic>-because
aji-ga ochimasu-yo.
taste-nom decrease
“Conger eels in the net <move in the bata-bata way>, so they get less tasty.”

(KTS: 46)

intransitive verb, Subject: agent (=fish)

(10) mayaku-chuudokusha-ga kusuri-ga kireru-to
drug-addict-nom drug-nom run out-when
bata-bata-suru-no to onaji...
<mimetic>-that with same
“in the same way as a drug addict <moves in the bata-bata way> when he runs out of the drug...”

(KTS: 47)

intransitive verb, Subject: agent (=human being)

(11) Naya-no to-wa ... bata-bata-site, mimizawari-da.
barn-gen door-top <mimetic> rough-is
“The barn door is <moving noisily in the bata-bata way> and is annoying.”
intransitive verb, Subject: theme (=door)

(12) naka-ni-wa ashi-o bata-bata-suru kata-mo iru-no-desu-yo
among-top legs-acc <mimetic> person-also there is
“Among them are people who move their legs in the bata-bata-way.” (KTS: 47)
transitive verb
Subject: agent (=human being), Object: theme (=body parts)

(13) musume-wa te-ashi-o ima-made ijooni
daughter-top arms-legs-acc now-until more
bata-bata-suru yooni narimasita.
<mimetic> has come to do
“My daughter has been <moving her arms and legs in the bata-bata way> more than ever.”
transitive verb
Subject: agent (=human being), Object: theme (=body parts)

(14) rooka-o bata-bata-suru
hallway-along <mimetic>
“(he) moves along the hallway in the bata-bata way”
intransitive verb (of motion)
Subject: agent (=human being), [path (=hallway)]

As is annotated under each of the examples, the transitivity and the selection of arguments and adjuncts vary widely with bata-bata-suru. (9–11) are all intransitive sentences, but the semantic roles of the subjects are either agent, as in (9–10), or theme, as in (11). The same mimetic verb can also be used transitively, as in (12–13). Among prosaic verbs, we find verbs like agaru “go up” and hairu “go in, enter” that appear in
the intransitive frame with either agent or theme subject. However, when these prosaic verbs are to be used for causal motion in a transitive frame, their morphologically related transitive verbs, i.e. *ageru* and *ireru*, must be used instead. That is, the intransitive verbal forms of *agaru* and *hairu* cannot express both intransitive motion and caused motion at the same time. In contrast, (9–13) show that *bata-bata-suru* does not follow such a constraint to which prosaic verbs are subject. Turning to (14), *bata-bata-suru* in this example is used intransitively, and co-occurs with a path expression, *rooka-o* “along the hallway”. None of the instances of *bata-bata-suru* in (9–13), whether intransitive or transitive, can appear with a path expression as in (14). This is attributed to the different types of motion events: in (9–13) the mimetic verb refers to the movement of a whole entity or body parts whereas in (14) a movement implies change of location. But more relevant to our discussion is that a single mimetic verb has access to a variety of argument and adjunct selection, to an extent that is not available to prosaic verbs. First, *bata-bata-suru* is used both intransitively and transitively; second, as an intransitive verb, it can take either agent or theme as subject; and third, it takes a path phrase in the intransitive pattern when it describes a motion resulting in change in location. In contrast, there is no single form of a prosaic verb that allows for these three argument structure and adjunct patterns at the same time.

A third property of mimetic verbs that differs from prosaic verbs has to do with what has been known as transfer of meaning or regular polysemy (cf. Apresjan 1974; Lehrer 1978). As Apresjan (1974) demonstrates, members of a semantically coherent set of verbs behave uniformly in their extension of meaning leading to polysemy. In English, for example, a change-of-state verb, *bake* as in *bake a potato*, has another meaning as a creation verb, as in *bake a pie*. This semantic extension from change of state to creation also applies to other members of change-of-state verbs like *carve* and *sew* (cf. Rappaport Hovav & Levin 1998). The same situation holds for prosaic verbs in Japanese, between change-of-state verbs and creation verbs parallel to English. Lehrer (1978), furthermore, demonstrates that the hypothesis in (15) is confirmed especially with synonyms and antonyms in her investigations of wine vocabulary.

(15) If there is a set of words that have semantic relationships in a semantic field (where such relationships are described in terms of synonumy, antonymy, hyponymy, etc. (Lyons 1977), and if one or more items pattern in another semantic field, then the other items in the first field are available for extension to the second semantic field. Perceived similarity is not necessary.

This pattern of regular polysemy and transfer of meaning does not seem to be observed in mimetic verbs (Tsujimura 2010). For example, there is a class of mimetic verbs that describe different types of pain, including *chiku-chiku-suru*, *gan-gan-suru*, *hiri-hiri-suru*, *piri-piri-suru*, *kiri-kiri-suru*, and *zuki-zuki-suru*, among others; their conventionalized definitions are in (16).
(16) *chiku-chiku-suru:* said of an intermittent pain akin to being stuck by thorns or needles  
*gan-gan-suru:* said of one’s head throbbing or feeling as if it is being continuously struck  
*hiri-hiri-suru:* to smart (said of a lingering feeling of pain/irritation on the skin)  
*piri-piri-suru:* said of a pricking pain  
*kiri-kiri-suru:* said of a splitting pain  
*zuki-zuki-suru:* to rankle (a throbbing pain with a pulsing sensation)  

(Chang 1991: 85–88)

Of these mimetic verbs, only *piri-piri-suru* extends its meaning to the dimension of emotional states to describe oversensitivity or nervousness. Furthermore, *gan-gan-suru* and *zuki-zuki-suru*, the very subtle meaning difference notwithstanding, can reasonably be considered synonyms. However, the synonymous relation does not transfer to the domain of object contact: *gan-gan-suru* describes the action of striking a metal-like object with force or its sound, while no synonymous meaning can be obtained for *zuki-zuki-suru* in this domain.

I give another example of lack of regular polysemy or systematic meaning transfer. According to Chang (1991), *para-para-suru*, *pasa-pasa-suru*, *basa-basa-suru*, *bosoboso-suru*, and *poro-poro-suru* are classified under the rubric of ‘dry texture’, and as he defines in (17), they can be considered synonyms. Of these mimetic verbs, only *bosoboso-suru* has an extended meaning that falls under another semantic field of ‘speech’, as in (18), but not others. That is, transfer of meaning from the texture field to the speech field is not attainable. In addition, *para-para-suru* can further be used to describe sprinkling rain while no other mimetic verbs in (17) are likely to allow such an extension.

(17) *para-para-suru:* said of something in a dry, loose, scattered condition  
*pasa-pasa-suru:* dry and crumbly (due to lack of moisture or oil content); to lack flavor and fragrance  
*basa-basa-suru:* same as *pasa-pasa*, but mostly referring to something thinner and lighter; to be dehydrated  
*bosoboso-suru:* to be dried out and unpalatable  
*poro-poro-suru:* to be dry and crumbly (said of something that crumbles or drops off)  

(Chang 1991: 98–99)

(18) *Koochoo-sensei-no hanashi-wa itsumo koe-ga hikuku*  
principle-gen speech-top always voice-nom low  
*bosoboso-shite-ite kikitorinikukatta.*  
<mimetic> hard to hear  

“The principle spoke low and in the bosoboso way, so his speech was hard to hear.”  
(bosoboso: in a whispering/subdued tone; in a low voice and an inarticulate manner)  

(KTS: 126)
The polysemy in mimetic verbs and the meaning relation among what seems to be a semantically coherent set discussed in relation to (16–17) and many more examples like them point to the observation that the nature of multiple meaning in mimetic verbs cannot be captured in terms of regular polysemy or the systematic transfer described in (15); instead, it seems to be more adequately characterized as ‘irregular polysemy’. That is, the meaning extension with mimetic verbs does not pattern according to semantic class, from one class of verbs to another; rather, the relationship among various senses associated with a given mimetic verb is unique to that particular mimetic verb, and the same relationship cannot be transferred to another.

The last meaning-based property that separates mimetic verbs from prosaic verbs concerns their lexicalization patterns (cf. Talmy 1985, 2000). It has been observed, primarily based on motion verbs, that Japanese prosaic verbs fall under the typological class in which motion and path are lexicalized as meaning components more readily than motion and manner. For example, there are more prosaic verbs that are distinguished based on the nature of path of motion than those that lexicalize manner of motion; and when a path verb is further described by manner, mimetic words as adverbs serve as a frequent tool – see (19). Such a pattern is also observed beyond motion events, extending to verbs describing pain and verbs of looking, as in (19–21); cf. Hamano (1998); McClure (2000); Tsujimura (2007a, 2007b).

(19) motion (walking): *aruku* “walk”

chocko-choko *aruku* “waddle”

*teku-teku* *aruku* “trudge”

toko-toko *aruku* “trot”

doshi-doshi *aruku* “lumber”

tobo-tobo *aruku* “plod”

*bura-bura* *aruku* “stroll”

*yota-yota* *aruku* “trot”

*yochi-yochi* *aruku* “toddle”

(20) pain: *itamu* “hurt”

*zuki-zuki* *itamu* “throb”

chiku-chiku *itamu* “prick”

*hiri-hiri* *itamu* “smart”

*pi-piri* *itamu* “tingle”

*shiku-shiku* *itamu* “griping”

*gan-gan* *itamu* “splitting”

(21) looking: *miru* “look at”

*jiro-jiro* *miru* “stare”

*jitto* *miru* “gaze”

*chira-chira* *miru* “glance”

*maji-maji* *miru* “look hard”

*kyoro-kyoro* *miru* “look around”

(Tsujimura 2007a: 449)

These examples and many more like them clearly show that the manner component is not regularly incorporated in prosaic verbs; it is a component that is commonly expressed external to the verbs. Mimetic verbs naturally do not follow this pattern since manner constitutes the heart of their meanings. Mimetic verbs of pain in (16) and mimetic verbs of motion in (19’) below serve as instances of lexicalization of the manner component.
(19’) motion (walking)

chocko-choko-suru “waddle”
toku-toku-suru “trot”
tobo-tobo-suru “plod”
yota-yota-suru “stagger”

“teku-teku-suru” “trudge”
doshi-doshi-suru “lumber”
bura-bura-suru “stroll”
yochi-yochi-suru “toddle”

Thus, mimetic verbs differ from prosaic verbs in the conflation pattern.

3. Conclusion

To summarize, I have demonstrated that mimetic verbs exhibit a set of meaning-related properties that separates them from prosaic verbs. First, mimetic verbs show an extraordinary range of flexibility in their meaning, leading to polysemous situations. The nature of such meaning ranges from conventionalized meaning on a par with that of prosaic verbs to innovative meaning that often relies on specific contextual information and pragmatic conventions for its proper interpretation. Second, related to the first point, mimetic verbs appear in a variety of argument structures as well as adjunct selections. Third, regular polysemy or systematic transfer of meaning that is commonly observed with prosaic verbs does not characterize the polysemous situation that emerges from mimetic verbs. And, finally, mimetic verbs do not follow the same lexicalization pattern as prosaic verbs, and manner incorporation in mimetic verbs is a natural consequence of the nature of mimetic bases upon which corresponding verbs are built. All these properties argue against an analysis that treats the meaning of mimetic verbs and that of prosaic verbs uniformly since such an analysis fails to fully capture the special properties of mimetic verbs.

Space does not allow me to go into details, but an analysis that I envision to accommodate these particular properties of mimetic verbs would invoke notions and principles relevant to construction grammar (Goldberg 1995, 2006) and frame semantics (Fillmore 1977a, 1977b; Goldberg 2010) as well as possibly metaphor (Croft 2009).3

Mimetic bases such as chin, bata-bata, and gan-gan, around which mimetic verbs are formed, are individuated by the imagery that each base is associated with. The images that appeal to the five senses that humans have are the heart of mimetic words in general, and a collection of images is represented at a level similar to what Kita (1997) calls ‘affecto-imagistic dimension’ (cf. Nuckolls 1996). The categorial status as verbs, by virtue of the morphological shape of the verb suru, suggests that mimetic verbs denote

3. Akita (2012) demonstrates the collocational relation between mimetic adverbs and lexical verbs, providing an analysis based on frame semantics. Although the exact nature of the relation between mimetic words and semantic frames/scenes differs between his analysis and the work presented here, I believe that they are nevertheless in the same spirit in the underlying assumption that frame semantics can make a significant contribution to capturing the unique semantic characteristics associated with mimetics.
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states, events, or processes (cf. Aronoff 1980); and the images are conceptualized vis-à-vis states, events, or processes in semantic frames or scenes. The image of a mimetic base serves as the most salient part of a profiled scene. The relation between the image of a mimetic base and a semantic frame in which the image is conceptualized is essentially not constrained, resulting in a wide range of possible interpretations including innovative meaning that requires metaphorical extension or a high degree of contextual information. The flexibility in interpretation as well as in argument structure and adjunct selection results from this one-to-many relationship. Furthermore, the image of a mimetic base seems to contribute its descriptive function to a given semantic frame: for instance, the flapping image or accompanying sound of the mimetic base, bata-bata, highlights the flapping manner of a motion. This is why lexicalization of manner is very common with mimetic verbs. Individual images of mimetic bases are independent of one another, and each image in principle does not have a fixed association with a specific semantic scene. That is, the range of semantic frames in which an image is conceptualized and the range of semantic frames in which another image is conceptualized do not need to pattern in a parallel way. The free-agent status of each image in relation to possible semantic frames gives rise to irregular polysemy, namely, lack of the systematic meaning transfer that is observed with prosaic verbs. It is hoped that this initial sketch will be further elaborated on in future work in order to put the characteristics of mimetic verbs that are independent of, as well as overlapping with, those of prosaic verbs in a larger map.

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References


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4. This sketch of how the ‘meaning’ of a mimetic verb is captured also applies to mimetic-base innovative verbs, as is discussed in Tsujimura & Davis (2011).

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