Abstract

In this response I would like to take up the issues that have motivated the two-dimensional approach to mimetics in Japanese advanced by Kita (1997). Kita claims that mimetics belong to the affecto-imagistic dimension while other word classes belong to the analytic dimension, and that the semantic properties of mimetics are not fully integrated with the other parts of a sentence. I will demonstrate that the phenomena that have motivated Kita are based on inaccurate assumptions or can receive other interpretations and analyses. Drawing on the data from mimetic predicates, I will demonstrate that what Kita calls the “meaning of a mimetic” should not be attributed solely to the mimetic word itself, but rather result from more global information obtained throughout a sentence in which the mimetic appears. The conclusion drawn from my argument is that mimetics are indeed fully integrated with the other parts of the sentence.

1. Introduction

Mimetics in Japanese, as is the case with mimetics in other languages, have drawn a great deal of attention due to their elusive nature. A number of researchers have investigated mimetics from various angles. Kita (1997), for one, claims that adverbial mimetics in Japanese belong to the affecto-imagistic dimension of meaning, as opposed to the analytic dimension, and that “the semantics of a mimetic and that of other parts of a sentence are not fully integrated with each other despite the fact that they are syntactically integrated” (1997: 386). According to Kita, the affecto-imagistic dimension of meaning is the dimension in which “language has direct contact with sensory, motor, and affective information” whereas the analytic dimension is “the dimension of decontextualized predication” (1997: 380) and is characterized by “decompositional
and hierarchical representation in terms of decontextualized semantic partials” (1997: 409).

In this response, setting aside the question of whether the two dimensions that Kita proposes are necessary, I will argue, drawing on the data from mimetic predicates, that the meanings of mimetic words are indeed integrated with other parts of a sentence and that they need to undergo linguistic analysis just like other linguistic elements that belong to what Kita calls the analytic dimension. More specifically, I will demonstrate that a verb that consists of a mimetic word and suru ‘do’ not only can but also must be treated in the dimension that Kita refers to as the analytical dimension, thereby making mimetic predicates totally on a par with nonmimetic predicates in their linguistic analysis. In what will follow below I will first point out some of the problems that Kita’s analysis faces regarding adverbial mimetics and will argue that at least some of the arguments that he advances to motivate the dichotomy of the two dimensions are not as convincing as he intends. I will then show that mimetic predicates should receive a treatment that would have the level of involvement in the analytic dimension equal to that of nonmimetic predicates.

2. Problems with adverbial mimetics

In this section I will comment on some of Kita’s arguments that motivate the analysis that adverbial mimetics must belong to the affecto-imagistic dimension. First, Kita attributes the alleged contrast in (1) to the different dimensions to which a nonmimetic adverbial phrase in (1a) and a mimetic adverbial in (1b) belong (Kita 1997: [8]).

(1) a. (*)[Taro wa] [isogi-asi de] [haya-ariKI o] si-ta.
   Top hurried-feet with haste-walk Acc do-Past
   ‘Taro walked hastily hurriedly’ (lit. ‘Taro did haste-walk with hurried feet’).

b. [Taro wa] [sutasuta to] [haya-ariKI o] si-ta.
   Top Mimetic Comp haste-walk Acc do-Past
   ‘Taro walked hurriedly.’

Kita explains that in (1a) the adverbial, isogi-asi de, and haya-ariKI o belong to the same dimension, that is, the analytic dimension, and the two phrases that express hastiness are interpreted as redundancy or wordiness. The mimetic in (1b), sutasuta to, on the other hand, belongs to the affecto-imagistic dimension, while haya-ariKI o belongs to the analytic dimension, and hence there is no wordiness.
The wordiness indicated by “(*)” in (1a), however, can be attributed to the fact that the adverbial isogi-asi de and haya-aruki o do mean virtually the same, and this has very little to do with the two dimensions. For instance, the example in (2) contains an adverbial that describes hastiness but it can cooccur with haya-aruki o without arousing a sense of wordiness or redundancy.

(2) Taroo-wa [zisokuX-kiro-no hayasa de] [haya-aruki o] do-Past Taro-Top X-kilo per hour-Gen speed at haste-walk Acc si-ta. ‘Taro walked hurriedly at the speed of X-kilo per hour.’

Presumably, the phrases zisoku X-kiro-no hayasa de and haya-aruki o belong to the same dimension, the analytical dimension, in Kita’s terminology, and it is predicted that they should not be compatible. As (2) indicates, the sentence is not considered redundant or wordy. This is in fact quite a common phenomenon, as is evidenced by the English example in (3).

(3) (*)John walked fast hastily.

It has been observed that when two adverbs have very similar meanings, their cooccurrence leads to redundancy and wordiness. Furthermore, isogi-asi de and haya-aruki o in (1a) both refer to feet and describe the manner of fast walking, whereas the mimetic in (1b) describes the manner of motion that is beyond fast walking: for example, sutasuta to refers to fast walking but also expresses smoothness of the movement. Hence, it is not clear whether the difference between (1a) and (1b), if any, should come from anywhere but the nature of the dimension to which the phrases in question belong.

Second, Kita claims that mimetics are often associated with iconic gestures, and that such a tight association comes from the affecto-imagistic representation. For example, it is observed that the italicized mimetic words in (4)–(5), taken from Kita (1997: [13]–[14]), have been expressed with accompanying strokes.

(4) [biru o baa to] sagat -te building Acc Mimetic Comp go-down and baa = movement with great momentum ‘(the cat) goes down the building with great momentum, and’ Gesture = right hand, with index finger extended, moves forcefully downward.
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(5) [furiko mitai ni si te sono kondo wa pyon tte pendulum like Dat do and well this time Top Mimetic Comp it te] go and
pyon = a swift jump
'(the cat) goes swiftly like a pendulum, and'
Gesture = left hand, with index finger extended, moves with an arc to the right.

According to Kita, mimetics and iconic gestures “originate from a single underlying mental representation” (1997: 395) and hence they both belong to the afecto-imagistic dimension.

The data and discussion, however, do not clearly show that iconic gestures accompany every type of mimetic. That is, the mimetics in the examples in (4)–(5) both refer to motion, which is presumably more concrete than mimetics that denote ideas and thoughts, and hence the mimetic–gesture association is arguably more straightforward in these cases. It is not clear from the discussion to what degree the semantic types of mimetics have been taken into consideration. Without such information, it is totally left open whether the claim applies to all cases of mimetics. Furthermore, it should be pointed out that lexical items that presumably belong to the analytic dimension in Kita’s term are often accompanied by gestures. For instance, deictic words such as kore ‘this’ and are ‘that over there’ as well as personal pronouns such as watasi ‘I’ and anata ‘you’ are regularly uttered with pointing gestures; and even nondeictic expressions to simply convey the message that I have a headache or stomach ache can be associated with a combination of pointing and a gesture. Even if Kita somehow distinguishes pointing from gestures, it would seem to be a very arbitrary distinction. Hence, the association of gestures with mimetics does not provide a strong motivation for mimetics being in the afecto-imagistic dimension.

Third, Kita states (1997: 402), “A mimetic imposes selectional restrictions on different facets of the described eventuality” and gives an example of the adverbial mimetic, gorogoro: this mimetic requires a specific manner of motion, that is, motion with rotation. The following example (Kita’s [25a]) illustrates such a selectional restriction.

(6) [tetu no tama] ga gorogoro to {*subet/korogat} -ta iron Gen ball Nom Mimetic Comp slide/roll Past
gorogoro = movement of a heavy round object with continuous rotation
‘An iron ball {*slid/rolled on},’
Sliding is not associated with rotation, and subetta ‘slid’ yields an oddity. Furthermore, Kita argues that mimetics never impose selectional restrictions on the agent, based on the example in (7), taken from Kita (1997: [26a]).

(7) dareka ga tama o gorogoro to korogasi -ta.
   Somebody Nom ball Acc Mimetic Comp make-roll Past
   ‘Somebody rolled a heavy ball.’
   *‘Somebody heavy rolled a ball.’

Since gorogoro does not impose a selectional restriction on the agent, the mimetic cannot modify the subject in this sentence. What is strange about this argument, however, is that if there is no selectional restriction on the agent, it means that any NP can freely cooccur with the mimetic, and hence the second interpretation in (7) should be allowed. In addition, consider the following.

(8) Me ga gorogoro suru.
   eyes Nom Mimetic do
   ‘My eyes feel as if there is something in them.’

First, if it is the mimetic gorogoro itself that imposes restriction on manner of motion, as is argued for in (6), (8) should be ungrammatical. It does not cooccur with any expression that denotes a motion involving rotation. A foreign object in the eye does not need to be accompanied by literal rotation. Second, if it is the mimetic under a specific word category, adverbial in this case, that is relevant to the restriction on manner of motion, what makes the mimetic an adverbial as in (7) or a verb as in (8) should play a crucial role in such a selectional restriction. However, the complementizer to and the verb suru presumably belong to the analytic dimension, and thus integration of the two dimensions is essential to the selectional restriction at issue. Of course, it should be remembered that Kita’s main claim includes the denial of such integration. Furthermore, in relation to the selectional restriction on the agent, or more specifically lack of it, mimetics of the sort displayed in (9) do place a selectional restriction on the agent.

(9) Gamu o kutyakutya suru.
   chewing gum Acc Mimetic do
   ‘Someone is chewing gum.’

In this sentence, the agent must be a human being. If the mimetic does not impose a selectional restriction on the agent, it could be a dog or a bird, or even a car, none of which would be acceptable in (9). This type of mimetic verb will be taken up again in the next section, but the
point I would like to make here is that mimetics in general have a wide range of reference as a result of metaphorical extension; and, without regard to the rest of a sentence, it is often impossible to determine what selectional restriction, if at all, should be imposed.

3. Mimetic verbs

In this section I would particularly like to take up two issues that Kita raises regarding mimetics: that mimetics impose no selectional restriction, and that mimetics “select” various eventuality types. I will demonstrate that these characterizations are not only inaccurate but also based on inadequate assumptions. I will argue that the nature of these phenomena Kita attributes to mimetics should in fact be accounted for by putting together pieces that are distributed throughout a sentence. To this end I will focus on mimetic verbs that consist of mimetic words and the verb suru ‘do’.

As discussed in section 2 above, Kita claims that mimetics impose no selectional restriction on the agent. The example he uses to illustrate the claim is repeated below.

(10) dareka ga tama o gorogoro to korogasi -ta
    Somebody Nom ball Acc Mimetic Comp make-roll Past
    ‘Somebody rolled a heavy ball.’
    *‘Somebody heavy rolled a ball.’

As I pointed out earlier, all this example shows is that the mimetic word is not appropriate to describe the subject. That is not to say that there is no selectional restriction on the agent: if there were no restriction, then the NP that corresponds to agent should be any individual whether it be a human being or an inanimate object. What is crucial here is that it is misleading to call the type of semantic compatibility described in (10) “selectional restriction” simply because it is not the mimetic by itself that determines the compatibility between it and agent or between it and theme: in order for the entire sentence to make sense with an adequate modification relation between the mimetic and what is described by it, parts of the sentence need to be considered. And, most importantly, this is because mimetics are essentially used metaphorically and what makes a modification relation “compatible” is determined by the specific metaphorical use that the speaker intends. It is certainly not a property inherent to mimetic words themselves.

In order to further illustrate the global nature of mimetics, consider the various uses of the following mimetic verb, burabura-suru.
(11) Doa no totte ga burabura-suru.
   door Gen knob Nom Mimetic-do
   ‘The doorknob is loose.’
(12) Asi o burabura-si-naide suwarinasai.
    legs Acc Mimetic-do-without sit
    ‘Sit without swaying your legs.’
(13) kooen o burabura-sita
    park Acc Mimetic-did
    ‘I strolled in a relaxed way in the park.’
(14) Otto ga uti de burabura-site-iru.
    husband Nom home at Mimetic-is doing
    ‘My husband is wasting time at home (without doing anything important).’

In all the examples the same mimetic word is used. Notice that what Kita calls “selectional restriction” of manner or theme is not very obvious, and even when the mimetic imposes restriction on manner or theme, the restriction that is followed in one sentence is not necessarily applicable to the rest of this set of examples. For instance, the manner expressed in (11) is lack of physical tightness of an object, while the manner imposed in (13) is relaxed motion. The individuals modified by the mimetic in (11) and (14) are contrastive: one is an inanimate object and the other is a human being. Thus, the mimetic word, *burabura*, does not single out a specific manner or a particular selection of semantic participants of an eventuality independently of the remaining parts of each sentence. Mimetic words, in and by themselves, are elusive. They may be restricted to a certain set of images that are accepted by the speaker as long as s/he views them as appropriate to describe a situation, but at the same time, they can easily be expanded to other images by metaphorical extension. This elusiveness in meaning (as well as in category) has frequently been observed and is in fact reflected in a variety of definitions, which are not necessarily related to each other. For example, Ono (1984: 319) gives the following definitions for the mimetic *burabura*.

(15) a. Describes the motion of a hanging or drooping object swaying under an external force.
    b. To stroll about in a relaxed way.
    c. To live one’s life or pass one’s time idly without any particular aim.

Furthermore, it is important to point out that some of these meanings or senses arise when the mimetic appears in a specific morphological environment. If one considers dictionary definitions, there are some senses
that are not compatible with certain morphological environment. The mimetic *jirijiri* expresses intensity, and for this reason, it is often used to describe a loudly ringing alarm clock and also the burning sun. The mimetic does not refer to an alarm or the sun; rather, it gives rise to images that may be characterized as intensity. But, when the mimetic is used to describe the intensity of the loud sound that an alarm clock emits, it cannot be used with *suru*; instead, it appears with *naru* ‘ring’. In contrast, to describe the burning sun, the mimetic can cooccur with *suru* as in *jirijiri suru* as well as with the verb *teru* ‘shine’. Such compatibility certainly is not the kind of restriction that Kita’s term “affecto-imagistic dimension” deals with. Considering other parts of a sentence necessarily invokes linguistic analyses of verbal morphology as well as the function of the arguments of the verb, and it in turn means integration of the two dimensions. That is, the intended sense is obtained only after the integration between a mimetic word and the rest of the sentence. Thus, the mimetic and all those parts that are relevant to narrowing down the multiple senses that mimetics bear to ultimately the most appropriate one must be integrated, and if the dichotomy of dimensions is indeed substantial at all, the integration must take place between the affecto-imagistic dimension and the analytic dimension.

Let us turn to the next point, aspectual properties of mimetics. Kita further claims that adverbial mimetics “select some combination of Vendler’s (1967) categories: state, activity, accomplishment, or achievement” (1997: 404). According to him, for example, *gorogoro* selects activities or accomplishments (although he does not provide any examples to illustrate each) while the nonreduplicated mimetic *goro* is punctual and selects achievements or accomplishments. Another mimetic *bitya* ‘a liquidy object hitting a flat surface, splashing the liquid’ (Hoshi’s definition) selects only achievements.

First, as was mentioned above, categorial status is not inherent to mimetics. So, when Kita calls a mimetic an adverbial, he assumes that it is accompanied by *to* or that it is so judged by the way it is used (or distributed) in the sentence in which it appears. This means that when he refers to an “adverbial” mimetic, he is automatically assuming the integration of the two dimensions because the information about categorial status belongs to the analytic dimension in his terms.

Second, as categorial status is not inherent to mimetics, neither is aspectual selection. Again, what he considers “aspectual property” is the information that is gathered throughout a sentence. I will illustrate this point again by using the mimetic verb complex with *suru*. Consider the following examples, in which the mimetic *gorogoro* is used as a part of a verb.
(16) Asoko ni kireina isi ga gorogoro-siteiru.
   over there at pretty stone Nom Mimetic-do
   ‘There are many pretty stones over there.’
(17) Sonna tokoro de gorogoro-si-naide.
   that kind place at Mimetic-don’t do
   ‘Don’t waste your time at that kind of place.’

The eventuality expressed in (16) is a state: the sentence describes the static situation of the scattered presence of pretty stones. On the other hand, the sentence with the mimetic in the negative imperative form in (17) refers to a dynamic, atelic eventuality, an activity. Given the mimetic gorogoro alone, there is no way of predicting in which aspectual class the eventuality should be classified. Rather, the aspectual property is determined based on more globally obtained information that includes the verbal morphology and sometimes animacy of the subject, among other things. For example, the combination of the inanimate object and the V–te iru morphology in (16) is a crucial cue leading to the stative interpretation; and the negative imperative verbal morphology in (17) clearly points to a dynamic event. Additional examples are given below with the mimetic burabura.

(18) Asoko made burabura-siyoo.
   over there to Mimetic-let’s do
   ‘Let’s take a leisurely walk to that place.’
(19) Sono hen de burabura-sita.
   that area at Mimetic-did
   ‘I took a leisurely walk around that area.’
(20) Totte ga burabura-suru.
   knob Nom Mimetic-do
   ‘The knob is loose.’

In (18) the combination of the consultative verbal ending -yoo and the delimiting expression asoko made ‘to that place’ leads to an eventuality that is dynamic and telic but nonpunctual, that is, accomplishment. In (19) the postposition de indicates a location of an action, as opposed to a location of existence (expressed by ni), and thus the eventuality is an activity. The combination of an inanimate object, totte ‘knob’, and the present tense verbal morphology gives rise to the stative interpretation in (20). The three-way contrast demonstrated in (18)–(20) clearly shows that aspectual properties of the eventuality denoted throughout a sentence cannot result solely from any inherent properties of mimetic words. Contrary to what Kita claims, mimetic words in and by themselves are quite open with respect to aspectual properties. And, since aspectual
properties must be obtained globally throughout a sentence, again if we were to assume the existence of two dimensions, this could not be explained without invoking the integration of the two.

4. Conclusion

In this response I argued against Kita’s (1997) view of mimetics in Japanese, that the semantic nature of mimetics belongs to the affecto-imagistic dimension and that mimetics do not exhibit any integration with the other dimension, that is, the analytic dimension to which other parts of a sentence belong. In arguing against his observations and claims, I have particularly emphasized that the semantic nature of mimetics, as well as their categorial status, cannot be determined without taking into consideration other parts of the sentence. I have specifically focused on what he calls “selectional restriction” and aspectual properties of mimetics and have argued that they should not be attributed directly to mimetics; rather, these properties are artifacts of more global information spread throughout a sentence in which a mimetic word appears. The justification of two dimensions, affecto-imagistic and analytic, is to be sought in future investigations, but as far as Kita’s analysis of Japanese mimetics is concerned, these two dimensions, or the dichotomy of the two, are not the complete story.

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Note

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