

SOUND SYMBOLISM AS A UNIVERSAL DRIVE TO
ASSOCIATE SOUND WITH MEANING:
A COMPARISON BETWEEN ENGLISH AND JAPANESE

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1. Introduction

At a face value sound symbolism (SS henceforth) manifestations in the two languages cannot be correlated but the aim of the present paper is to evidence that the similarities between them are nevertheless more astonishing than the differences. Indeed only under an assumption of the scalar character of SS (suggested by Hinton et al. 1994: 1-12) can we treat the English phonaesthemes and Japanese mimetics as the two facets of the same phenomenon, which only differ in the degree of conventionality or iconicity they display. Following this argument the comparison below attempts to trace the common features of the two manifestations and in this way present SS as a kind of mechanism of associating sound with meaning which tries to 'adjust' its universal traits to the conditions of a particular language system as well as culturally determined linguistic preferences of a particular speech society.

Japanese mimetics comprise a distinct group of words of a canonical phonological shape, well-defined grammatical function and, what seems most vital, their sound symbolic nature is consciously perceived and utilised by the native speakers (see Takehi et al., 1996, Hamano 1998). Though disregarded by the majority of bilingual (Japanese-English) dictionaries (Hamano 1998) their role in the language system as well as everyday communication is so pervasive that recently the Japanese issued dictionaries entirely devoted to the admirably numerous mimetic items (Chang 1990, Takehi et al. 1996).

On the contrary the English SS repertoire seems to lie at the outskirts of the language system as well as the competence proper. What has been labelled by Firth 'phonaesthemes' (Firth 1964a, b) apparently 'emerged' from a vast English vocabulary and came into linguistic focus owing to his selection and the premise for the existence of an unconscious sound-meaning associations, secondarily imposed by

speakers on the primarily 'sound-symbolically neutral' (arbitrary) English lexicon (Firth 1964b: 184-185). Scattered across vocabulary, and being just 'ordinary' words of English, phonaesthemes not only lack any specific phonological construction that would distinguish them from other lexical items but most of all their SS cogency is highly contextual (i.e. it requires a context to focus on the form of a message, i.e. poetry, slang, linguistic test conditions; see Crystal 1985, Jakobson and Waugh 1979, Wescott 1987). In this way, according to the majority of linguists involved in the matter, SS not only does not perform any special role in the system of English language but mainly its users are unaware or simply indifferent to this phenomenon in everyday communication. There are however scholars who would claim that English SS is not limited to the conventionalised iconism, thus phonaesthemes in Firthian terms. On the contrary, they would argue to identify as belonging to the category of SS certain lexical items, which reveal numerous features of natural motivation (Oswald 1994) and are also susceptible to submorphemic analysis (Rhodes 1994). Supporting the following comparison with the data accumulated by them I attempt to highlight the universality of SS and to suggest a thesis that in the case of English and Japanese it is a culturally inhibited or encouraged attitude towards SS that influences both the use and status of the phenomenon in the particular speech society.

2. Two basic types

Japanese linguistics divides the extensive set of lexical items referred to as mimetics into two major categories: sound imitating, thus onomatopoeic (A. *giseigo*) and manner-symbolic, thus more broadly ideophonic (B. *gitaigo*) (Hamano 1998), e.g.:

- (1) A. *pota-pota* – 'dripping trickling drop by drop'
- (2) B. *bisyo-bisyo* – 'soaking wet'

Following the Firth's theory English SS is exclusively conventionalised, revealing no traits of natural (universal) motivation. According to the scholar sound and meaning correlations among consonantal clusters or vowels are recognised by the speakers of English due to the "habitual phoneticizing of experience" (Firth 1964b: 184), i.e. the fact that particular sounds are heard and produced to describe particular contexts of behaviour. Therefore English phonaesthemes, if at all, are comparable only with the manner-symbolic category of Japanese mimetics.

However, regardless of the Firthian idea of exclusive conventionality of phonaesthemes, Rhodes (1994) and Oswald (1994) traced in the vocabulary of English certain items of natural sound symbolic motivation, mainly among verbs mimicking inanimate sounds. I would argue that their findings allow us to conclude that English SS, similarly to Japanese, comprises both naturally motivated (sound mimicking) forms as well as those of secondarily imposed iconism. Consequently, we should expect to trace in every language SS manifestations of different amount of iconicity or conventionality in accordance with a scale proposed by Hinton (1994).

Both types of SS (iconic and conventional), likewise onomatopoeia, are actually understandable only within a particular speech society and therefore iconic proves not to be universal. Nevertheless SS possesses definite natural roots which can be traced across all languages despite particular inconsistencies determined by the language system (phonological shape, notional system) and cultural environment (attitude towards the use of SS in communication).

2.1. Natural traits in English and Japanese SS

The accumulated evidence on SS proves its natural roots based on biological, typically human capacities (symptomatic signals of disease and emotion: Oswald 1994; synesthesia: Childs 1994; acoustic features of particular phonemes: Ohala 1994, Fischer-Jørgensen 1978) as well as other features shared also by animals (sexual dimorphism, vocal anatomy: Ohala 1994, Lapolla 1994). They all correspond to vocalic and consonantal associations.

The following section aims at pointing out two of the most significant phonemes from the point of view of their natural SS potential. Such examples help to assume the existence of certain preferred choices across languages with regard to SS correlations despite the reality of a certain amount of conventionalisation and further inconsistencies in the lexical repertoire of a particular language discussed below (Sections 3, 4, 5).

2.1.1. Stops

Both in English and Japanese stops evoke an impression of abrupt or explosive sounds. English: "short abrupt sound and actions: *bop, pop, tap, tick*" (Oswald 1994: 297). Japanese: "an abrupt and explosive movement of event such as hitting and explosion or the precondition for such in the form of tension" (Hamano 1998: 86).

- (3) Tebukuro-no hamaQta ryoote-o paN-paN yaQ-te misemasita
'[The baby] fox clapped his hands several times with the mittens on'.
- (4) PoN-to biiru-no seN-o nuita.
'I popped open the beer bottle.' (Hamano 1998: 86).¹

2.1.2. Fricatives

According to Hamano in Japanese contrasting /p, b/ with /h/ and /t, d/ with /s, z/ indicates that abruptness and complete closure is a general semantic feature of stops in opposition to non-explosive release of air (Hamano 1998: 94-5):

¹ /Q/ and /N/ are phonemic representations of syllable-final moraic obstruents and nasals (Hamano 1998: 9); many Japanese mimetics are monosyllabic but from the perspective of Japanese prosody they are bimoraic formations.

- (5) Mama-ni tyu-Q-te kisu-site.
'Give Mummy a smacking kiss.'
- (6) Gasu-no oto-ga syuu-syuu sita.
'I heard the hissing sound of leaking gas' (Hamano 1998: 95).

As regards English, Oswalt points to a similar correlation of "abrasion or air turbulence" (Oswalt 1994: 297) e.g. *fizz*, *hiss*. Whereas Rhodes ascribes fricative-initial forms to a category of "poorly resolvable onsets: *z- zip, zing, zak, zot, zoom*" (Rhodes 1994: 282) and fricative-final to "extended decays: *-sh crash, splash, whoosh*" (Rhodes 1994: 284).

Certain acoustic features of stops and fricatives allow to treat the above correlations between English and Japanese not as accidental but as naturally motivated associations. Their universality however should be considered to operate in the manner of preferred choices, thus leaving space for language specific inconsistencies in terms of 'unnatural' selections.²

2.2. Form

As it was already stated, English SS apparently does not conform to any canon in terms of phonological shape (despite the attempted canon by Oswalt 1994). However it shares with the fixed formations of Japanese (CV and CVCV) the functional differentiation of the place of a particular phoneme within a lexical item. This mainly regards the contrast between onset and coda, which in an iconic manner refer to the beginning and end of a particular imitated extralinguistic sound.

English:

- (7) abrupt beginning + frictional end = stop + fricative; e.g.: *puff, poof, plash*
(Oswalt 1994: 298);
- (8) fric.+w+V+stop = an object moving swiftly and forcefully through the air and the movement stopped abruptly by striking something; e.g.: *whack, thwack, swack*
(Oswalt 1994: 300).

Japanese: similarly to the above case, purely imitative motivation can be found among CV formations, which are claimed by Hamano to be more iconic than their CVCV counterparts (Hamano 1998: 214-5). The latter, on the other hand, encode information more analytically and at the same time refer to more abstract notions through synesthetic association: "a consonant is broken up into two distinct semantic dimensions, 'texture' and 'movement', and each consonant realizes only one of the

² Cf. Korean case of a reverse choice in vocalic SS: front vowel=big vs. back vowel=small (cf. Kim 1977; Martin 1992; also Sapir 1949; Diffloh 1994).

dimensions in a given environment" (Hamano 1998: 215); e.g.: /k/ symbolizes 'a hard surface' or 'an in-out movement' in the initial and second syllable respectively; /t/ symbolizes 'a lax surface' and 'hitting' in the same manner (Hamano 1998: 170). This distinction is so consistent that a reversal of position causes a predictable change in meaning, e.g.

- (9) *kotu-kotu* = "a hard surface is involved in hitting";
- (10) *toku-toku* = "a lax surface is involved in an inward/outward movement"
(Hamano 1998: 170).

3. Synesthetic extension

The constancy of semantic differentiation in the Japanese CVCV formations reveals an apparent feature of SS items of synesthetic correlations. The latter are still motivated by the natural process of crossmodal association, however the notions to which they refer are no longer direct imitations of sounds. The role of their phonological components is more abstract and therefore they are more susceptible to linguistic constraints as well as further metaphoric extensions which serve as sources of the alleged inconsistencies among SS manifestations across languages (see also section 4).

3.1. Voiced vs. voiceless

In English, according to Asher, voiceless consonants evoke sudden sounds, e.g.:

- (11) *clack, click, cluck, crack*

whilst voiced express a more duller or muffled sound:

- (12) *pad, thud* (Asher 1994: 4066).

Moreover plosives /t/ and /d/ when used in the past tense endings in English refer to an abrupt or more gradual process respectively, as in the contrast:

- (13) The water spilled drop by drop over the rim.
- (14) The milk spilt all over the floor when she dropped the pitcher. (Asher 1994: 4066).

In Japanese the voiced/voiceless contrast seems more systematic for Hamano provides the contrastive 'minimal pairs' for all obstruents present in the phonemic repertoire. Voicing of obstruents in this case signifies the notions of 'heavy/large/coarse/thick':

- (15) *pota-pota* – 'drop of thin liquid'

(16) *bota-bota* – ‘drop of thick liquid’ (Hamano, 1998: 125).

Although the two languages seem to ascribe the contrast to different meanings, the important issue is that they both identify it as a sound symbolically significant feature. Its SS significance based on synesthetic associations seems to be confirmed by a test on the perception of the voiced/voiceless contrast among the native speakers of English (Oszmiańska 2000). The choices revealed a surprising, almost 100% (4 correct choices out of 5 items) congruity with the Japanese oppositions of size, quantity and intensity (big, intense = voiced vs. small, faint = voiceless). However even more intriguing was a tendency for the reverse choice in the last section which required an assignment of the provided Japanese items to good vs. bad (boy) opposition (in contrast to Japanese the majority selection was: voiced=‘good boy’, voiceless=‘bad boy’). The hesitation among the subjects in the choices requiring value judgements seems to imply the formerly suggested (Section 3) impact of the notional system and cultural background on sound symbolic sensitivity. On the other hand the concord with Japanese meanings provides evidence for the primarily synesthetic character of SS associations (Jespersen 1923, Crystal 1985, Bright 1992).

4. Metaphoric extension

Having their primary source in aural and further synesthetic sensations (visual, tactile, olfactory) SS correlations discussed in section 3 should be treated, however, as secondary extensions of a metaphorical kind. The apparent order of abstraction from the most imitative (sound mimetic) to highly abstract (metaphorical) seems to be traceable even across the meanings attached to particular SS items, e.g.: English ‘sl-’ phonaestheme:

- (16) sliding movement: *slide, slip, sloop, slope, slouch, slump* (imitative);
- (17) slimy, wet substances: *slime, slop, slurry, slush* (synesthetic);
- (18) indolence, carelessness: *slack, slatten, sleazy, slob, slut*;
- (19) cunning, crafty: *sleuth, slippery, slick, sly* (metaphoric extension)
(examples: after Asher 1994).

Japanese: the mimetic cogency of /p/ and /b/: ‘breaking, submergence, explosive event’ (Hamano 1998: 142) is extended to ‘decisiveness’ and ‘freshness’ e.g.:

(20) *suQpori*

meaning ‘wrapping up with cover as if submerged in it’ and ‘once and for all’ (Hamano 1998: 143-144).

Certain lexical items of both English and Japanese may belong solely to one of the levels of the posited order of abstractness, e.g. possessing only metaphorical

meaning. However the majority of SS formations seem to gain semantic extensions (on the synesthetic and metaphorical level) which automatically implies conventionalisation with reference to phonological as well as notional system of a particular language.

5. The use and cultural impact

The potential SS cogency of particular phonemes is usually constrained by the phonological repertoire of a given language, subsequently the attached meanings fall into semantic relations within the lexicon and the notional system. However the final status of SS within daily communication as well as in the system of language depends on the conscious use of SS formations on the side of a language user. This factor, vital for the acknowledgement of SS items, is argued in this paper to be determined by culture, which shapes linguistic behaviour and creates attitudes towards certain modes of its use.

The main difference between English and Japanese seems to lie in the general focus on the propositional content of the message (thus objectified information) within the western cultural tradition, as opposed to context preoccupation (priority of the speaker’s perspective) favoured by the Asians (Maynard 1997: 166). The latter preference implies the proliferation of particles, among them mimetics, communicating the culturally significant information of sociological, psychological and situational context. As a consequence the English are more concentrated on the agent and the course of action (Maynard 1997: 171), while the Japanese give priority to the background, which again encourages mimetics (on mimetics of manner see Hamano 1998) used to depict the event as a changing state ‘rather than a sequence of actions’ (Maynard 1997: 172).

Japanese culture creates a favourable environment for SS also due to its traditional attitude of ‘nonlogocentrism’, that is the preference for silence and visual (kinaesthetic) mode of communication (Maynard 1997: 180) which can be claimed to result in the drive towards iconic, thus both auditory and visually (synesthetically) determined, sound form of words.

To conclude, English culture prioritising the propositional content and agent-focused information inhibits the development of SS as a part of a system and competence proper. On the contrary, mimetics for the Japanese are essential as a medium of culturally significant information which by the English would be perceived as ‘colouring’, thus additional, rather than central part of communicative act.

According to the above argument culturally shaped attitudes encourage (Japanese) or inhibit (English) the use of SS as a means of communicating significant or insignificant information, respectively. Moreover I would argue that this chain of interrelated factors: culture-attitude-usage, also determines the status of SS in the system proper of a particular language. As a consequence we can assume that SS is a universal human capacity which, under conditions of a particular language and cul-

ture environment, retains an overt status (Japanese) or, conversely, becomes latent (English).

6. Conclusion

The attempted comparison between English and Japanese manifestations was aimed at supporting the thesis of the universal character of SS as a tendency to associate sound and meaning which reveals the twofold nature of its motivation: 1. natural – due to inherent properties of sounds, 2. conventional – as if secondarily imposed correlations within language and culture conditions. In this way SS is argued to operate across languages in the same manner, thus as a mechanism revealing many ‘covert’ universally distributed features despite its ‘overt’ uniqueness within every speech society.

Both Japanese and English SS manifestations seem to be motivated on the natural and conventional level which at the same time apparently corresponds to the scalar character of the phenomenon proposed by Hinton (1994). Starting from the most iconic, there are items referring to universally perceivable features of phonemes. Their universality can however be treated solely in terms of preferred choices since the final shape of a SS formation is always ‘impeded’ by the phonological repertoire of a given language. Furthermore as SS items tend to be motivated by cross modal associations their meaning is conditioned by the notional system of a given language. Consequently the more abstract the notion to which a given item refers the less chance for it to be universally perceived (cf. value judgement in voiced vs. voiceless consonantal contrast). In this way the primarily synesthetic correlations on their entering into relations within the lexicon and the notional system of a given language obtain a kind of metaphorical extension. Of course the presented examples are not identical in both languages. What they share is the mechanism, thus grammatical function, semantic expansion as well as certain naturally motivated semantic features of sounds. The phonological shape and meaning of a SS item is always conditioned by the principles of the system. However in this paper it is assumed that extralinguistic factors thus culturally stimulated speaker’s attitude towards SS, contribute to the significant or marginal status of the phenomenon.

Universality of SS, therefore, should neither be seen as uniformity of its perception on the part of every language speaker nor should we expect to find identical manifestations across particular language systems. Taking into account these limitations and the accumulated data on the presence of sound symbolic correlations in various languages which reveal consistency in the nature of their motivation we can assume that SS is a universal potential based in natural roots. Nevertheless the structure and use of its formations are of linguistic nature, thus language structure will always “overshadow the iconic principles” (Hamano 1998: 213).

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