

The use of mimetics and gesture among speakers of Japanese as a second language

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Japanese mimetics are often reported to be difficult for speakers of Japanese as a second/foreign language (L2). Recent work examining L2 Japanese learners' comprehension/perception of mimetics (Naito-Billen 2013; Nakaishi, Sakamoto & Sakai 2014) found that understanding mimetics is indeed challenging even for advanced learners (Nakaishi et al. 2014). Research on production found that L2 Japanese speakers rarely produce mimetics until they are at least intermediate-level (Iwasaki 2008, forthcoming; Yoshioka forthcoming).

The difficulty of mimetics is at odds with the facilitative role of iconicity (i.e. word forms resembling referents) for children's first language (L1) development (Imai et al. 2008; Yoshida 2012). However, L2 speakers greatly differ from L1 children in that they already have knowledge of their own L1. Their habitual use of L1 likely has 'trained' them for the ways they should lexicalize and linearize the concepts they are conveying—as proposed in the Thinking-for-Speaking hypothesis (Slobin 1991). For instance, English speakers use manner verbs and Japanese speakers use (mimetic) adverbs or adverbial clauses to habitually encode manner of motion. Their language may also train them to pay attention to features of the motion events that are linked to their language. Researchers found that L2 speakers' L1 affects their construal of motion events (e.g. Jarvis & Pavlenko 2008; Pavlenko 2014).

Iconic words like mimetics may be fundamentally different from other words. Whether L2 Japanese speakers' L1 has a rich repertoire of such words (e.g. Korean) or not (e.g. English) may affect the ways they use mimetics. Mimetics are frequently accompanied by co-speech iconic gestures (Dingemanse 2013; Kita 1997), and by some accounts, both mimetics and gesture reflect the imagistic and motor sensory nature of thought (Kita 2000). On the one hand, given that mimetics, and especially phonomimes, can imitate the perceptual aspects of referents and that gestures can capture imagery, these two modalities may be a handy communicative tool for L2 speakers to depict events regardless of L1. On the other hand, whether their L1 utilizes such words or not may affect their use of mimetics. Given the close integration between speech and gesture (Kendon 2004; McNeill 1992; Kita & Özyürek 2003), their L1 may also affect their use of gesture when speaking Japanese as L2.

In order to examine L1 influence and iconicity in L2, we examine the use of mimetics by L2 Japanese speakers whose L1 is English (N=13) and Korean (N=17), who narrated video-clips of animation (motion events) and disasters. We examine the domains where mimetics are used (e.g. types of movement), types of mimetics used, the co-occurrence of gesture and speech (frequency and qualitative analysis), and the meaning expressed by mimetics and gesture.

The preliminary analyses show that both groups of L2 speakers used phonomimes and phenomimes, though Korean speakers were more likely to produce mimetics to depict momentum of movement. The syntactic functions seem to differ. L1 English speakers tend to use Japanese mimetics as verbs while L1 Korean speakers use them as adverbs. The co-occurrence between speech and gesture was often observed regardless of their L1.

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