

The phonological structure of Japanese mimetics and motherese

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This paper discusses the close relationship between mimetics and motherese (baby talk words) in Japanese from phonological perspectives. Japanese is known to have a rich inventory of words both in mimetics and motherese. These two types of vocabulary share many items since many baby talk words in the language come from mimetic words, many of which are reduplicated forms, e.g. *pon.pon* ‘belly’, *wan.wan* ‘dog’, *buu.buu* ‘car, pig’, *un.chi* ‘poo-poo’, *shik.ko* ‘peepee’ (dots indicate syllable boundaries). The other major source of baby talk words is adult forms of ordinary verbs and nouns: e.g. *da.ku* ‘to hold’ → *dak.ko*, *ku.tsu* ‘shoes’ → *kuk.ku*, *ba.ba* ‘grandma’ → *baa.ba*, *o.bu.u* ‘to hold on one’s back’ → *om.bu*, *ha.u* ‘to crawl’ → *hai.hai*.

In syntactic terms, mimetics and motherese are used in different ways in Japanese, with the former used mainly as adverbs, and the latter basically as nouns. However, a close examination from phonological perspectives reveals some interesting similarities in prosodic structure. First, both mimetic and baby talk words are basically disyllabic although mimetic words permit longer strings of syllables as well, e.g. *yu.ra.yu.ra*. Second, they are also similar to each other in that they do not permit words ending in a sequence of a light (monomoraic) syllable plus a heavy (bimoraic) one, i.e. LH. Words in motherese consist of either a heavy-light sequence (HL), e.g. *dak.ko*, *un.chi*, or a heavy-heavy sequence (HH), e.g. *pon.pon*, *hai.hai*. There is no baby talk word that consist of an LH sequence. Mimetic words apparently permit this latter structure, e.g. *ba.tan*, *ko.ton*, but these items cannot be pronounced without the monomoraic particle *to* in connected speech: e.g. *ba.tan-to*, *koton.to*. This suggests that mimetics as well as motherese cannot end in an LH sequence. Third, all baby talk words are lexically ‘accented’, i.e. pronounced with an abrupt pitch fall, as opposed to ‘unaccented’, i.e. pronounced without a pitch fall. This feature is basically shared by mimetic words which permit the unaccented pattern only in some restricted and predictable context, i.e. when used as adjectives. This fact is astonishing because a majority of native words in (Tokyo) Japanese are lexically unaccented, raising an interesting question of why words in mimetics and motherese are basically accented.

After demonstrating that mimetics and motherese in Japanese share basic prosodic biases, this paper argues that these biases represent the unmarked prosodic structures of the language. It shows, specifically, that these unmarked prosodic structures are observed in various phenomena of adult phonology, as the emergence of the unmarked (TETU).