

**The phonological regularity of Japanese mimetics:
Segmental markedness in mimetic neologisms**

Akio Nasu
University of Tsukuba

Mimetics in Japanese are well-known as a sound-symbolic vocabulary stratum in which the sound pattern of each word establishes an intimate phono-semantic relationship with its meaning. Sound-symbolic motivations frequently exert profound influence on the sound pattern of mimetic items. One representative example of a sound-symbolically motivated pattern is voicing contrast. A voiced feature is assigned to the initial obstruent of a mimetic stem to signal negative or pejorative meanings such as roughness, dirtiness, unpleasantness, heaviness, dullness, or crudeness etc. (Komatsu 1981; Hamano 1986, 1998; Labrune 2012).

However it is not the case that all aspects of mimetic sound patterns are controlled solely by such sound-symbolic motivations. Even when a feature participating in the process itself reflects some particular sound-symbolic meaning, the output pattern created by the process exhibits quite systematic phonological regularity. Palatalization occurring in bimoraic mimetic stems is a suitable example for illustrating this point. While the feature characterizing palatalization symbolizes iconic meanings such as ‘childishness’ (Hamano 1986, 1998) or ‘uncontrolledness’ (Mester and Itô 1989), its manner of appearance is not random but regulated systematically. It in principle associates to the rightmost coronal consonant other than a rhotic /r/ in a mimetic stem, whereas the leftmost consonant is selected as a target of default association if the stem has no coronals. These behaviors are revealing in that phonological grammar plays a key role in regulating the sound patterns of mimetics even in a process reflecting sound-symbolism.

Building on this observation, I will discuss the phonological regularity of Japanese mimetics in this talk. In the first half of the talk, I will introduce some theoretical findings in mimetic phonology developed in a past few decades, making reference to prominent phonological phenomena in Japanese mimetics such as obstruent voicing.

The second half will discuss the role of segmental markedness observed in a mimetic word formation process as one representative issue having to do with phonological regularity. Many mimetic neologisms show that the phonological pattern of mimetic prefixes is determined on the basis of the criterion of segmental markedness. Since a prefix in such neologisms consists of a core syllable, i.e. a CV structure, any phonotactically admissible CV mora could serve as the prefix in theory. But actually, the distribution of segments in mimetic prefixes is uneven. Segments containing unmarked feature specifications are favored as elements of the CV prefix. A voiced coronal obstruent /z/ or /d/ is likely to appear as the consonantal

element of the prefix, and the high back vowel /u/ is strongly favored as the vocalic element of the CV prefix when the preceding consonant is /z/, while /o/ is the probable candidate if the preceding consonant is /d/. Interestingly enough, these patterns are identical to the distribution of epenthetic vowels in the process of loanword adaptation in Japanese. This fact is quite intriguing in that the sound patterns of mimetics are regulated in part by phonological principles identical to those at work in non-mimetic vocabulary items such as loanwords.