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Classification of nominal compounds containing mimetics: a Construction Morphology perspective

In Japanese, some nominal compounds have mimetic components, such as the ones given below (NCMs henceforth).

(1) *hokahoka-gohan*
MIMETIC(warm)-rice
'warm delicious-looking rice'

(2) *bata-ashi*
MIMETIC(fluttering)-leg
'flutter kick (of swimming)'

(3) *mune-kyun*
heart-MIMETIC(wrung)
'feeling emotional'

Though some NCM characteristics have been discussed (e.g. Kageyama and Saito 2016), little work has attempted to classify NCMs. A notable exception is Yang's (2013) classification of NCMs into semantic categories. For instance, the NCM in (1) belongs to the category 'shape/condition', whereas the one in (2) belongs to the category 'physique'. Albeit indicative of general tendency, Yang (2013) simply describes the fact, leaving the crux of matter unaddressed: we still do not know how the classification is relevant to word-formation of nominal compounds in general. This paper addresses the issue, working within the framework of Construction Morphology (CxM). Building on Booij (2010: 7), I propose an inheritance hierarchy for nominal compounds, whose top node diverges according to the head position, and whose next lower nodes diverge into the categories 'attributive-appositive' and 'subordinate', adapted from Scalise and Bisetto's (2009) classification. I argue that NCMs are part of the hierarchy (cf. Figure 1).

Examination of 100 representative NCMs from different sources indicates the following points. First, NCMs are mostly right-headed, but a limited number of instances are headless (e.g. *bata-ashi* 'flutter kick' in (2) is a method of swimming; it is neither a kind of 'fluttering' nor a kind of 'leg'). Second, mimetics typically appear as the left element but can appear as the right element (cf. (1) vs. (3)). Third, NCMs can be argued to be an instantiation of an abstract constructional schema, such as (4), which illustrates the case for the attributive type, a subset of the 'attributive-appositive' compounds.

Schema for attributive nominal compounds in Japanese:

(4) $< [X_i\text{-}N_j]N_k \leftrightarrow [SEM_j \text{ with attribute } SEM_i]_{SEMk} >$

(5) … … … $< [X_i\text{-}\textit{hada}\ (\text{'skin'})_N]N_k \leftrightarrow [\textit{skin (of someone)} \text{ with attribute } SEM_i]_{SEMk} >$

(6) [*kansoo*$_{VN}$-*hada*$_N$]$_N$ 'dry skin'; [*yawa*$_{AN}$-*hada*$_N$]$_N$ 'soft skin'; [*tsurutsuru* (MIMETIC)$_{AN}$-*hada*$_N$]$_N$ 'smooth skin'

Figure 1: Partial sketch of the hierarchical network of nominal compounds

(4) shows that the compound noun N_k consists of the right element (head noun N_j) and the left element (modifier X_i), expressing the attribute SEM_i of the head SEM_j (or its metonymically related entity). (4) becomes less abstract when N_j is replaced by an actual noun, such as *hada* 'skin' as in (5). This can be further concretized by specifying the attribute as in (6), where the variable *x* can be replaced by either a non-mimetic word (e.g. *yawa-* 'soft') or a mimetic (e.g. *gasagasa-* 'rough'). As implied by this example, mimetics can enrich lexical varieties of nominal compounds.

The CxM representational system proves useful to indicate where NCMs appear in the word network, clarifying how mimetics participate in word formation of nominal compounds in Japanese.

Selected reference: Yang, Shu-Yun. 2013. Semantics of the compound nouns from onomatopoeia. *Chūka-nihon-kenkyū* 4.1-20.