Sound-symobolic approach to Japanese mimetic words

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Sound-symobolic words are an important aspect of the Japanese language which facilitates communication and provides speakers with rich means of expression. To non-native speakers of the language, however, these words remain one of the most difficult word layers to master. In addition to the fact that mimetic words are culturally loaded and thus have unique nature, the process of learning them is also hindered by the shortage of efficient teaching materials and linguistic research. This study examines the close relation between same strings of sounds observed in words and their semantic properties, and introduces 37 phonaesthetic patterns. Moreover, contradictory to Saussure’s traditional theory of the unmotivated nature of the linguistic sign, it argues that in some mimetic words there exists a close relation between sound and meaning.

1. Introduction

Sound-symobolic forms in Japanese have been semantically defined as words imitative of sounds and words imitative of modes. The former consists of two subcategories: giseigo (describing the sounds produced by living creatures, such as people, animals, birds and insects), and giongo (referring to the sounds of the inanimate world, such as rain, wind, and lifeless objects). On the other hand, words imitative of modes include gitaito (words expressing physical modes, such as actions and states) and gijōgo (words depicting psychological modes, such as attitudes and feelings). Although each category concerns different areas of human perception, in the research available so far a rigid semantic distinction between them has often been disregarded. However, in this paper I make a clear distinction between onomatopoeia and mimesis and deal with the latter.

The sound-symobolic forms in Japanese can be divided into mimetic adverbs and mimetic nominal adjectives, most of them forming idiomatic expressions in combination with the copula /suru/ (Hamano 1998:11). As some of the words are difficult to translate without a specific context, I translate them as adverbs, adjectives and verbs although the copula /suru/ and other verbs are omitted.

Unlike most European languages, in which onomatopoeic and mimetic words are
considered unrefined or baby talk, in Japanese they are an indispensable component of the language and reveal the subtle sensitivity of Japanese people in the way they perceive the world. People of all ages employ mimetic words in communication, believing that speech that abounds in such words sounds much more natural and full of life than speech that tends to avoid them. According to a study by Noma (1998:30), Japanese has the second largest layer of such words following Korean with more than 2,000 onomatopoeic and mimetic expressions. They overwhelm ordinary speech, literature and the media due to their expressiveness and load of information. Although they are never used in official documents, it is not exceptional to hear them in formal situations, too.

For non-native speakers, however, Japanese mimetic words are one of the most difficult linguistic aspects to master. While studying Japanese abroad many learners are not aware of the immense number of mimetic words since they are not introduced until the intermediate level of most Japanese language courses and only several expressions appear in the textbooks. Once foreigners arrive in Japan, they are inundated with the extensive use of mimetic words whose meanings are usually incomprehensible and often not available in dictionaries. Usually native Japanese speakers take these words for granted and do not realize how challenging their mastery for foreign learners is. Regardless of the fact that a large number of dictionaries and teaching materials of Japanese sound-symbolic forms have been published, non-native learners still encounter difficulties memorizing them.

To facilitate the situation, this paper introduces 37 phonaesthetic patterns typical for the majority of the Japanese mimetic words, which are believed to provide non-native speakers with an efficient method of memorizing these words and to enable them to predict the meaning of a word based on its phonological structure. In the analyses to follow CV stands for mora, X means variable which can be anything, /N/ indicates the syllable-final nasal that constitutes a full mora, and /Q/ signifies the first half of a geminate cluster, and it also constitutes a full mora.

2. Relation between sound and meaning

The most extensive research on sound-symbolism in Japanese has been introduced by Hamano (1998). She analyzes the phono-semantic associations of CV and CVCV-based mimetic adverbs and draws important conclusions about the semantic features attributed to consonants and vowels. Hamano claims that whereas consonants appear to be positionally differentiated, vowels do not. She further argues that consonants act independently from each other in words. The symbolisms exhibited by the initial and the second consonants, as well as by vowels are shown below in I, II and III respectively.
### I. C1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Letter</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Quality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>p</td>
<td>taut surface</td>
<td>light; small;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>fine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>taut surface</td>
<td>heavy; large;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>coarse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t</td>
<td>lack of surface</td>
<td>tension,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>subduedness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>light; small;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>fine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d</td>
<td>lack of surface</td>
<td>heavy; large;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>coarse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k</td>
<td>hard surface</td>
<td>light; small;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>fine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g</td>
<td>hard surface</td>
<td>heavy; large;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>coarse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>s</td>
<td>non-viscous body - quietness</td>
<td>light; small;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>fine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>z</td>
<td>non-viscous body - quietness</td>
<td>heavy; large;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>coarse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>h</td>
<td>weakness, softness - unreliability,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>indeterminateness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m</td>
<td>murkiness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>viscosity - slimness - sluggishness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>y</td>
<td>leisurely motion, unreliable motion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- swinging motion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>w</td>
<td>human noise - emotional upheaval</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[Hamano (1998:172)]

### II. C2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Letter</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>p, b</td>
<td>explosion, breaking - decisiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t</td>
<td>hitting of surface, coming into close contact,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>complete agreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k</td>
<td>opening, breaking, swelling - in-out movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>s</td>
<td>soft contact; friction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>h</td>
<td>breath</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>bending, elasticity, unreliability, lack of force,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>weakness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>y</td>
<td>sound of many sources, haziness - childishness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>w</td>
<td>softness - faintness - haziness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>r</td>
<td>rolling; fluid movement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[Hamano (1998:173)]
III. Vowels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>protrusion</th>
<th>line/tenseness</th>
<th>small</th>
<th>large</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>/i/</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/u/</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/o/</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/a/</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/e/</td>
<td>Vulgarity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[Hamano (1998:172)]

In III. above the values +/- mean ‘presence’ and ‘absence’ respectively. Hamano specifies that “initial vowels generally control the semantic dimension of the shape of the first object or movement”, whereas “second vowels control the semantic dimension of the size/shape of the second object or movement”. The vowel /e/ is an exception in both cases (Hamano 1998:172–3).

However, the assertion that sounds in words evoke associations on their own seems dubious. Counterexamples to Hamano’s classifications in (I) and (II) can easily be found by looking at words containing same sounds and looking at their meanings. For example, according to the classification in (I), in CVCV-based sound-symbolic adverbs, /m/ as an initial consonant expresses “murkiness”, whereas as a second consonant it has no particular meaning. Some of the words with initial /m/ are maza-maza (clearly, vividly), meki-meki (remarkably, fast), moyo-moya (hazy, murky), muka-muka (retch, go mad). Obviously, “murkiness” is not their common semantic feature. Another counterexample demonstrates that the consonants /k/ and /g/ in initial position, as in giku-shaku (jerky in its movement), gucha-gucha (sloppy; squelchy; squishy; messy), kachi-kachi (frozen; rigid), kara-kara (bone-dry; clatter), kyoro-kyoro (stare about), do not evoke associations with “hard surface” as stated in (I). Consequently, the classifications of sound-symbolic correlations of single consonants seem unable to give an adequate account of the majority of sound-symbolic forms.

I propose a different approach to the sound-symbolic effect observed in Japanese mimetic words based on native Japanese speech, as well as relatively complete and generally acknowledged resources of sound-symbolic forms, such as Giongo-Gitaigo Jiten, Kenkyusha’s New Japanese-English Dictionary, Kokugo Dai Jiten, New College Japanese-English Dictionary and Progressive Japanese-English Dictionary. First, all the CVCV-based mimetic words available in the corpus (about 380) were divided into two groups: a group of words with same initial mora and a group of words with same second or post-second moras. Second, the words falling into the same group were closely examined to prove existence or non-existence of common meanings. Altogether 199 CVCV-based mimetic words were put into categories based on similarities in meaning. Next, each category was assigned descriptors. The number of descriptors varies across categories: for some only one descriptor was sufficient, whereas for other categories more than one descriptor was needed to represent all the words included.
It became clear that many of the words containing same phonological clusters have similar meanings. *Similar meaning* in this paper does not refer to *synonymy*. It indicates a common semantic aspect in words. As a result, 37 phonaesthetic patterns typical for Japanese CVCV-based mimetic words were identified. The term *phonaesthetic* describes the presence of sequence of phonemes shared by words with some perceived common element in meaning. Firth (1930) first noticed this phenomenon and coined the term *phonaesthesia* indicating the role of the ablaut implied in a series like *drip: droop: drape* (Grew 1998:2). The sequence of phonemes was called *phonaetheme* (Grew 1998:1). Phonaesthesia has not been paid enough attention to due to the fact that it opposes Saussure’s theory of arbitrariness of the linguistic sign. Similarly, no attempt has ever been made to apply the phonaesthetic approach to the Japanese sound-symbolic system.

The majority of the patterns are based on reduplication which is one of the characteristics of Japanese CVCV-based mimetic words. Reduplication can be complete or partial, the former consisting of words with reduplicated two moras \((C_1V_1C_2V_2-C_1V_1C_2V_2)\) and the latter consisting of words with same second and fourth moras and different first and third moras \((C_1V_1C_2V_2-C_3V_3C_2V_2)\). Some examples of completely reduplicated words are *becha-becha, koso-koso, pika-pika*, and of partially reduplicated words are *ata-futa, mecha-kucha, jita-bita*.

Due to limited space each pattern is represented below in the following order: pattern, descriptor, three examples and exceptions (if any).

3. Phonaesthetic patterns in mimetic words

3.1 Phonaesthetic patterns represented by the first (and third) mora(s)

This subsection introduces 6 patterns of words sharing initial mora or its reduplication. The capitalization in the patterns only indicates the beginning of a word and in the actual words it demonstrates the common element recurring within a word and shared among words.

(1) \(\text{Mo + CV + mo + CV or Mo + X} \) “murdiness”

Examples: *MOgo-MOgo* (mumble), *MOQsari* (sluggish), *MOya-MOya* (hazy, murky)

Exceptions: *MOku-MOku* (send up great volumes of smoke), *MOri-MORi* (eat heartily; have a thick wad of muscles)

(2) \(\text{Mu + CV + mu + CV or Mu + X} \) “excessive energy”, “suppression”

Examples: *MUka-MUka* (retch, go mad), *MUN-MUN* (stuffy, sultry), *MUra-MUra* (irresistible of temptation)

Exceptions: 0

(3) \(\text{Ne + CV + ne + CV or Ne + X} \) “stickiness”, “tenacity”
Examples: *NEba-NEba* (sticky, greasy), *NEchi-NEchi* (sticky, persistent), *NE-Qtori* (clammy, viscous)

Exceptions: 0

(4) **No + CV + no + CV or No + X** “slow action”, “lack of stress/ anxiety”

Examples: *NObi-NObi* (feel at ease, be relaxed/relieved), *NOko-NOko* (nonchalantly), *NOro-NOro* (drag oneself, walk slowly)

Exceptions: 0

(5) **Yo + CV + yo + CV** “unsteady”, “unreliable”

Examples: *YObo-YObo* (feeble, shaky), *YOchi-YOchi* (toddle), *Yota-Yota* (totter)

Exceptions: 0

(6) **Yu + CV + yu + CV or Yu + X** “free of pressure”, “relaxing”

Examples: *YU-Qkuri* (slowly, at one's leisure), *YU-rari* (slowly), *YUsa-YUsa* (sway, to and fro)

Exceptions: 0

3.2 Phonaesthematic patterns represented by the vowel of the first mora and the whole second mora in reduplicated CVCV-based words

7 patterns of words with completely reduplicated CVCV-roots are included in this category.

(7) **C + asa + C + asa** “disappointing appearance due to some deficiency”

Examples: *bASA-bASA* (crumbly, friable, disheveled), *kASA-kASA* (dry, rough), *wASA-wASA* (nervous, restless)

Exceptions: 0

(8) **g/k + V + chi + g/k + V + chi** “lack of fluidity or space”

Examples: *GiCHI-GiCHI* (very tight), *KaCHI-KaCHI* (frozen hard, dried up completely), *KoCHI-KoCHI* (tense, stiff, frozen hard)

Exceptions: 0
(9) \(\text{C} + \text{obo} + \text{C} + \text{obo}\) “lack of vitality and energy”

Examples: \(\text{shOBO-shOBO}\) (dispirited, despondent, bleary-eyed), \(\text{tOBO-tOBO}\) (trudge wearily), \(\text{yOBO-yOBO}\) (feeble, shaky, unsteady)

Exceptions: 0

(10) \(\text{C} + \text{oro} + \text{(C)} + \text{oro}\) “slow action, idleness”

Examples: \(\text{dORO-dORO}\) (pulpy, mushy, thick), \(\text{ORO-ORO}\) (thrown off balance), \(\text{gORO-gORO}\) (lie about idly)

Exceptions: \(\text{bORO-bORO}\) (in big drops; worn-out), \(\text{hORO-hORO}\) (in small drops), \(\text{pORO-pORO}\) (in drops)

(11) \(\text{C} + \text{uja} + \text{(C)} + \text{uja}\) “unpleasant softness”

Examples: \(\text{gUJA-gUJA}\) (slushy, sloppy), \(\text{UJA-UJA}\) (wriggle)

Exceptions: 0

(12) \(\text{C} + \text{ura} + \text{(C)} + \text{ura}\) “shaking, swaying”

Examples: \(\text{kURA-kURA}\) (dizzy, reeling, spinning), \(\text{URA-URA}\) (gentle), \(\text{yURA-yURA}\) (quake, sway)

Exceptions: \(\text{sURA-sURA}\) (smoothly, without a hitch), \(\text{zURA-zURA}\) (extended)

(13) \(\text{C} + \text{yoro} + \text{(C)} + \text{yoro}\) “restless, unstable”

Examples: \(\text{chYORO-chYORO}\) (trickle, flicker), \(\text{hYORO-hYORO}\) (totter, toddle, stagger), \(\text{kYORO-kYORO}\) (look around restlessly/ nervously)

Exceptions: 0

3.3 Phonaesthematic patterns represented by the second and fourth moras

This is the largest category featuring 12 patterns of completely reduplicated CVCV-roots. It is interesting that the patterns apply to all the words with no exception.

(14) \(\text{CV} + \text{bu} + \text{CV} + \text{bu}\) “a great amount of liquid or flesh swaying”

Examples: \(\text{deBU-deBU}\) (fat and flabby), \(\text{gaBU-gaBU}\) (guzzle/chug (down), slosh), \(\text{zaBU-zaBU}\) (dash)

Exceptions: 0
(15) \((C)V + cha + (C)V + cha\) “disorder”, “disappointing appearance”

Examples: \(iCHA-iCHA\) (behave flirtatiously), \(goCHA-goCHA\) (messy, jumbled up), \(kuCHA-kuCHA\) (crumpled)

Exceptions: 0

(16) \(CV + go + CV + go\) “lack of confidence”

Examples: \(maGO-maGO\) (at a loss, disorganized), \(moGO-moGO\) (mumble), \(suGO-suGO\) (disheartened, downcast)

Exceptions: 0

(17) \((C)V + ji + (C)V + ji\) “cowardice, bewilderment”, “lack of enthusiasm /initiative”

Examples: \(iJI-iJI\) (hesitantly, timidly), \(moJI-moJI\) (bashful, fidget), \(taJI-taJI\) (quail)

Exceptions: 0

(18) \(CV + ke + CV + ke\) “impertinent”

Examples: \(nuKE-nuKE\) (impudently, brazenly), \(zuKE-zuKE\) (bluntly, without reserve), \(tsuKE-tsuKE\) (rudely)

Exceptions: 0

(19) \((C)V + ki + (C)V + ki\) “brisk/dynamic action”

Examples: \(doKI-doKI\) (beat fast, throb), \(meKI-meKI\) (remarkably, rapidly), \(shaKI-shaKI\) (briskly; concisely)

Exceptions: 0

(20) \((C)V + ne + (C)V + ne\) “meandering, winding”

Examples: \(kuNE-kuNE\) (sway, meander), \(uNE-uNE\) (winding, tortuous)

Exceptions: 0

(21) \(CV + nya + CV + nya\) “soft, unreliable, unstable”

Examples: \(fuNYA-fuNYA\) (limply, flabby), \(kuNYA-kuNYA\) (soft and cuddly), \(muNYA-muNYA\) (mumble)

Exceptions: 0

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(22) \(CV + \text{shi} + CV + \text{shi}\) “pressure”

Examples: \(\text{doSHI-} \text{doSHI}\) (hard over hand, without hesitation), \(\text{giSHI-} \text{giSHI}\) (squeeze; be packed), \(\text{hiSHI-} \text{hiSHI}\) (press, feel keenly)

Exceptions: 0

(23) \(CV + \text{so} + CV + \text{so}\) “timid, retiring”

Examples: \(\text{boSO-} \text{boSO}\) (in a subdued voice), \(\text{hiSO-} \text{hiSO}\) (in whispers), \(\text{koSO-} \text{koSO}\) (secretly, stealthily)

Exceptions: 0

(24) \(CV + \text{te} + CV + \text{te}\) “exceed the proper amount”

Examples: \(\text{boTE-} \text{boTE}\) (fat, obese), \(\text{goTE-} \text{goTE}\) (gaudy, heavy), \(\text{koTE-} \text{koTE}\) (thickly, lavishly)

Exceptions: 0

(25) \((C) \ V + \text{zu} + (C) \ V + \text{zu}\) “anxiety, impatience”

Examples: \(\text{guZU-} \text{guZU}\) (grumble), \(\text{muZU-} \text{muZU}\) (burning with desire), \(\text{uZU-} \text{uZU}\) (impatient, itching)

Exceptions: 0

3.4 Phonaesthematic patterns represented by all the moras but the first

This category includes 10 patterns of words with no reduplication. \(C1-V1-Q-C2-V2-\text{ri}\) and \(C1-V1-N-C2-V2-\text{ri}\) are the typical structures of the members of each pattern: a \(C1-V1-C2-V2\) base with sound-symbolic infix /\(N/\) or /\(Q/\) (Hamano 1998:27) and final element /\(\text{ri}/\). Here again no exceptions have been identified.

(26) \(C + \text{aQtari}\) “sudden/abrupt action”

Examples: \(g-\text{AQ}T\text{ARI}\) (destroy suddenly), \(b-\text{AQ}T\text{ARI}\) (run into, stop suddenly), \(p-\text{AQ}T\text{ARI}\) (suddenly, abruptly)

Exceptions: 0

(27) \(CV + \text{Nwari}\) “gentleness”

Examples: \(\text{fu-} \text{Nwari}\) (fluffy), \(\text{ji-} \text{Nwari}\) (well up slowly), \(\text{ya-} \text{Nwari}\) (gentle, mild)
(28) **CV + Qchiri** “successful, positively evaluated”, “compact”

Examples: *ba-QCHIRI* (perfect), *ga-QCHIRI* (solid, steady, tight), *ki-QCHIRI* (exact, perfect, tight)

Exceptions: 0

(29) **CV + Qkiri** “clear-cut, exact”

Examples: *ha-QKIRI* (clearly, without any misunderstanding), *ku-QKIRI* (clearly, distinctly), *nya-QKIRI* (stuck out)

Exceptions: 0

(30) **CV + Qpori** “exceed the proper amount (positive connotation)”

Examples: *ga-QPORI* (make a pile of money), *go-QPORI* (in a large quantity), *shi-QPORI* (wet through, tender and passionate)

Exceptions: 0

(31) **CV + Qpuri** “sufficient amount”

Examples: *do-QPURI* (to the full, be up to one’s neck in), *ga-QPURI* (drink up a large amount of liquid), *ta-QPURI* (plenty, full of)

Exceptions: 0

(32) **CV + Qsari** “many”

Examples: *ba-QSARI* (make a drastic cut), *do-QSARI* (heaps/loads of), *fu-QSARI* (abundant hair)

Exceptions: 0

(33) **CV + Qshiri** “plenty, packed”

Examples: *do-QSHIRI* (massive), *gi-QSHIRI* (closely, tightly), *zu-QSHIRI* (heavy)

Exceptions: 0

(34) **CV + Qteri** “heavy, fat”
Examples: \textit{go-QTERI} (thick, stodgy), \textit{ko-QTERI} (filling, rich), \textit{po-QTERI} (plump, chubby)

Exceptions: 0

(35) \textbf{(C)V + Qtori} “relaxing”

Examples: \textit{o-QTORI} (composed, gentle), \textit{shi-QTORI} (quiet, calm), \textit{u-QTORI} (enchanted)

Exceptions: 0

3.5 Phonaesthematic patterns in words of partial reduplication

These patterns include partially reduplicated words with different first and third moras, and second mora reduplicated in the fourth. Unlike other categories, there seems to exist a common semantic feature between the patterns included. Both patterns express “unregulated brisk action” usually with negative connotation.

(36) \textbf{C1 V1 + cha + C2 V2 + cha} “disorder, unattractiveness”

Examples: \textit{beCHA-kuCHA} (gab), \textit{meCHA-kuCHA} (unreasonable, incoherent), \textit{peCHA-kuCHA} (chatter)

Exceptions: 0

(37) \textbf{(C1) V1 + ta + C2 V2 + ta} “restlessness, fidgety”

Examples: \textit{aTA-fuTA} (hastily), \textit{doTA-baTA} (make a fuss), \textit{jiTA-baTA} (flail)

Exceptions: 0

In Japanese there exist sets of mimetic words that differ only in one mora, such as \textit{becha-becha} and \textit{becha-kucha}, \textit{mecha-mecha} and \textit{mecha-kucha}, \textit{pecha-pecha} and \textit{pecha-kucha}. They are usually identically defined in dictionaries and teaching aids designed for non-native speakers of the language. Despite the fact that such sets of words have similar meanings, they significantly differ in connotations. Complete reduplication, in general, gives a neutral description of actions/states/feelings, whereas partial reduplication evokes associations with anger, intensity and violence. This can be accounted for in the following way. Repetition of identical elements (sounds) creates a feeling of harmony and regularity (as is the case of complete reduplication). Contrary to that, by employing incoherent elements (sounds) lack of harmony, unbalance, disorderliness and intensity is conveyed (as is the case of partial reduplication) (Ivanova: 2002).

A natural question to ask at this point is “What determines the meaning of a mimetic word: the sequence of specific phonemes or their location?” Interestingly, the word \textit{ne-Qtori} consists of two different phonaesthemes: word-initial \textit{ne-} (pattern 3) and
-Qtori (pattern 35). Although each phonaestheme evokes associations with different ideas, the meaning of only one of them is conveyed to the meaning of the whole word. It can be inferred that there exists some kind of competition or agreement between phonaesthemes occurring in the same word. This phenomenon is observed in other words, such as mogo-mogo in which the phonaesthemes mo- (pattern 1) and -go- (pattern 16) compete and -go- wins over mo-, and moji-moji in which mo- (pattern 1) and -ji- (pattern 17) compete and ji- wins over mo-.

An account of the competition between phonaesthemes in a word cannot be given before further classification of mimetic words is made and more phonaesthematic patterns are identified. At this point, it can be predicted that there exists inequality between phonaesthemes in Japanese mimetic words. This inequality does not seem to be related to the position in which a phonaestheme appears, since as the examples given above show, the initial phonaestheme sometimes wins (as in ne-Qtori) and sometimes is suppressed by the other phonaestheme included in a word (as in mogo-mogo and moji-moji). A reason for the unequal status of phonaesthemes in terms of determining the meaning of the word might be the difference in the phonemes composing a phonaestheme. For example, based on the observation of the words moji-moji and mogo-mogo it could be assumed that /m/ is “weaker” in semantic properties than /j/ and /g/, disregarding the vowels included, since /o/ occurs in both phonaesthemes in mogo-mogo and does not seem to contribute to the victory of -go-. In a nutshell, sound-symbolic effect in Japanese mimetic words seems to be produced by two major factors: sequences of specific phonemes and their particular positions in words. However, this is only hypothesis without strong evidence. Arriving at an adequate account of this phenomenon is among the future goals of this study.

4. Concluding remarks

The analyses presented above gave evidence for the existence of some phonological form-meaning relation in Japanese mimetic words. This study is under way with many goals to pursue, but the results obtained can amount to the efficiency of the process of learning mimetic words by non-native speakers of Japanese by offering them a key to easily memorizing many of the words based on the phonaesthematic patterns.

References