

## A Comparison of Japanese and Korean Speakers' Production of Mimetic Words

This study employs experimental data to compare the use (production) of mimetics (phonomimes, phenomimes and psychomimes) by Japanese and Korean (henceforth J and K) speakers. The use of the same stimuli (auditory and pictorial stimuli) for J and K speakers in the experiments provides support for some claims made in previous studies regarding similarities/differences between the two languages, but also counterevidence regarding other claims.

With both J and K having similarly highly developed systems of mimesis, comparing the two systems has been a popular topic for previous research (see for example Garrigues 1995, Kang 1993, Lee, 2000, Shibasaki 2002). This research has made a number of important claims regarding the comparison of mimesis in the two languages, including the following points:

- (1) Some sounds are perceived as being relatively “fixed,” particularly animal noises (Shibasaki 2002: 81).
- (2) J and K speakers can associate similar mimetic words with similar sounds, particularly for phonomimes (Shibasaki 2002: 80)
- (3) Vowel alternation is meaningful in both languages but according to patterns that are at times contradictory. For example, whereas [a] and [o] represent lightness and smallness in K, they tend to connote heaviness and largeness in J (Garrigues 1995, Kang 1993, Shibasaki 2002).
- (4) Initial [p] is a characteristic feature of J mimetics and, similarly, is also the most widely occurring initial sound in K (Garrigues 1995). Few actual differences are noted between the uses of consonants in mimetic words between the two languages, except for (4) below.
- (5) Voiceless-voiced alternation signifies ‘light’ and ‘heavy’ in J whereas the three-step shifts from the lenis /p, t, k/, to its tense /p\*, t\*, k\*/, and to its aspirated forms /p<sup>h</sup>, t<sup>h</sup>, k<sup>h</sup>/ in K refer to simple, intensive, and paraintensive (e.g., Garrigues 1995; Lee 2000).
- (6) J has a more developed system of psychomimes than K (Shibasaki 2002: 82)

However, the limitation of previous studies is that the comparisons employed have relied entirely upon translation equivalents and the judgments of the authors themselves (or limited numbers of native speaking informants). Due to this, the data has only captured the most common and stereotypical features of J and K mimesis. There has, to this point, been no way to ascertain how these claims relate to the way that actual J and K speakers describe sounds, states, and manners of the same value.

To test how these previous claims relate to the perceptions of J and K speakers, the current study conducted 2 experiments, one utilizing audio waves, the other utilizing pictures on 27 and 20 native speakers of J and K, respectively. In the auditory experiment, participants were asked to provide words that would describe the sound they heard (noises produced by objects, water, animals and humans [laughing and slurping]). In the pictorial experiment, participants were asked provide the words that describe the pictures of laughing, walking, pain and emotion. Although both J and K groups were provided with identical stimuli, it should be noted that, due to circumstantial factors, the J experiments were conducted orally and K experiments in written form.

Although previous studies assume that mimetic words in the two languages are relatively fixed and stable (Shibasaki 2002), our data provides an altogether different picture. Indeed, in some cases, the responses were characterized by their lack of uniformity. As an example, the sound of a heavy door shutting with a “thud” was rendered in 16 different ways by the 20 K participants, featuring six different initial consonants [t, t<sup>h</sup>, t\*, tʃ, k<sup>h</sup>, l] and four different vowels [e, a, u, wu] and 11 different ways by 27 J participants, featuring 4 different initial consonants [d, b, g, z] and two different vowels [o, a]. See examples below:

Korean mimetic words used to describe a sound of door shutting with a “thud”:  
*chel-khek, chel-chek, tel-khek, tel-kheng, thak, tha-tak, ttwu-tek, ttwu-twuk, khwak, khwang,*

Japanese mimetic words used to describe a sound of door shutting with a “thud”:  
*batan, boko, dotan, don, dokaQ, dosaQ, gon, gatan* (Q refers to geminates)

Interestingly, the noise for which J speakers consistently used voiced consonants was described by the K speakers variably by any of the lenis, tense or aspirated consonants.

This lack of uniformity appears to shed light on some of the previous claims regarding mutual intelligibility between mimetic words in the two languages. When a wider range of mimetic items are considered, the fact that mimetic items may be mutually intelligible becomes less surprising. For example, most previous studies quote *wan-wan* and *meng-meng* as being the single, uniform mimetic words in J and K respectively for depicting a barking noise. However, in our study, *meng-meng* was chosen only by 5 K participants, whereas *wel-wel* (or *wal-wal*), a form not featuring in K dictionaries, was used by 12. Given this result, it becomes less surprising that the J term *wan-wan* is intelligible to K speakers.

Of some significance, the results from the study provide only very limited support for claims regarding vowel alternation made in previous studies using the translation equivalents approach. As noted above, previous studies have claimed that different vowel sounds in J and K have quite different or even opposing connotations. We may thus expect that J and K responses to the same auditory or visual cues would differ markedly in the use of vowels. However, in contrast to this, we found the use of vowels to show surprising similarities between the two languages and more counterevidence rather than evidence for previous claims made regarding the connotations of so-called “bright” and “dark” vowels in K. For the sound of a heavy door shutting with a thud (examples above), previous studies would predict the use of [a] denoting “largeness” (of sound and of the door) among Japanese speakers but “dark” vowels such as [i] and [e] among Korean speakers. Yet, both speakers often used [a] and never [i]—although [e] and [u] were also often used among Korean speakers. As another example, when describing the sounds of a small bell and that of gong, previous studies would predict the use of “bright” vowels such as [a] and [o] for a bell and ‘dark’ vowel [i] and [e] for gong in K. However, here both J and K speakers often chose [i] for a bell, and [a] [u-a] for a gong.

Rather than the use of vowels, our data showed more marked differences between the two languages regarding the use of consonants according to patterns not noted in previous studies. In particular, for auditory stimuli for which J speakers often used voiceless bilabial stop [p] or and velar stop [k] for the word-initial consonants, K speakers used words with alveolar consonants [t\*] [t<sup>h</sup>] [tʃ]. For example, water noises often described by [p] mimetic words (e.g., *potyan*) by J speakers were often described by words starting with alveolar consonants (e.g., *syak*, *chel-ssek*) by K speakers.

Finally, some limited support was found for previous claims that J may be more developed in terms of psychomimes. Four items on the test featured psychological states (namely, anger/irritation, disappointment, excitement, and relief) that were associated by J participants with specific mimetic words (namely, *iraira*, *syonbori/gakkari*, *wakuwaku*, *hotto suru*). However, for these items, the majority of Korean respondents preferred the use of a noun or adverb rather than a mimetic item.

By using experimental data, we believe that our research will contribute not only to the understanding of mimetics in these two languages that feature highly developed systems of sound-symbolism, but ultimately to explaining potentially universal aspects of mimesis. Furthermore, by looking at how speakers of the different languages and those of the same language map the same sound/state/manner in different ways provides a more complex but also more complete picture of the use of mimetic words.

## References

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