Mimetics as Root-Template Combinations:  
A Pedagogical Implication from Construction Grammar

Kimi Akita  
Kobe University and Japan Society for the Promotion of Science

1. Introduction
This paper rearranges Japanese mimetic (or sound-symbolic) vocabularies by identifying and characterizing their morphophonological constructions. Modern mimetics can be analyzed as combinations of either one- or two-mora root (e.g., doki for do^kidoki and doQki^ri; Hamano, 1998) and one of fifteen morphophonological templates (e.g., CV^CV^Q^, CV^CV^N^, CV^CV^ri, CV^CCV^ri, CV^CV-CVCV, and CV^CV-CVCV for CV^CV-roots; C = consonant, N = moraic nasal, Q = first half of a geminate cluster, V = vowel, ^ = accent nucleus). In fact, 95% of Kakehi et al.’s (1996) entries instantiate this. The following two experiments will discover the constructional properties of the mimetic templates, which will clarify the whole image of this word class.

2. Experiment 1: Mimetic Templates and Mimeticity
To confirm the significance of the mimetic templates in defining the mimetic category, I conducted an experiment that asked 30 Japanese speakers to judge how mimetic nonsense words (Parameter A: whether to satisfy a mimetic template; Parameter B: whether to have one of the four segmental features reported as unique to mimetic roots) sounded (1: not mimetic ↔ 7: very mimetic). Mean scores for the four groups were 4.91 (A/B = √/√), 4.43 (√/∗), 1.59 (∗/√), and 1.89 (*/*). A two-way ANOVA revealed that satisfaction of a template is the crucial determinant of a sequence of phonemes sounding mimetic ($F(1, 2998) = 94.14, \ p < .001, \ η^p^2 = .66$).

3. Experiment 2: Constructional Meanings of the Mimetic Templates
For semantic characterization of the mimetic templates, I thoroughly examined what kind of mimetic roots (619 phonomimic (imitating sounds; giongo) and nonphonomimic (or gitaigo/gizyoogo) roots abstracted from Kakehi et al., 1996) can enter each of the six CV^CV-templates. As a result, first, CV^CV^Q^, CV^CV^N^, and CV^CV^ri showed parallel tendencies ($F(2, 3) = 6.02, n.s.$), suggesting one common “suffixed” construction (CV^CV-X). Second, significant ill-affinity for phonomimic roots was observed for CV^CV-CVCV ($\chi^2(1) = 10.83, \ p < .001$) and CV^CCV^ri ($\chi^2(1) = 10.83, \ p < .001$). This is compatible with their alleged “resultative” meanings. Third, 88% of mimetic roots that enter CV^CV-CVCV can enter CV^CV-CVCV as well, which suggests that the former is derived from the latter through accent flattening.

4. Conclusion
The proposed mimetic constructions are thus semantically characterizable. Since they are limited in number and we can find such special templates in other languages (e.g., Hausa, Tamil) as well, they are expected to provide considerable help for L2 learners.

References

List of Technical Terms
Construction: A “form-meaning pair $<F_i, S_i>$ such that some aspect of $F_i$ or some aspect of $S_i$ is not strictly predictable from C[onstruction]’s component parts or from other previously established constructions” (Goldberg 1995: 4).