

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

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## 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<sup>^</sup>kidoki* and *doQki<sup>^</sup>ri*; Hamano, 1998) and one of fifteen *morphophonological templates* (e.g., CVCVQ<sup>^</sup>, CVCVN<sup>^</sup>, CVCV<sup>^</sup>ri, CVCCV<sup>^</sup>ri, CV<sup>^</sup>CV-CVCV, and CVCV-CVCV for CVCV-roots; C = consonant, N = moraic nasal, Q = first half of a geminate cluster, V = vowel, <sup>^</sup> = 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 4x25 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 =  $\sqrt{\sqrt{}}$ ), 4.43 ( $\sqrt{/*}$ ), 1.59 ( $*/\sqrt{}$ ), and 1.89 ( $/*/*$ ). A two-way ANOVA revealed that satisfaction of a template is the crucial determinant of a sequence of phonemes sounding mimetic ( $F(1, 2998) = 94.14, p < .001, \eta p^2 = .66$ ).

## 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 *gi-taigo/gizyoogo*) roots abstracted from Kakehi et al., 1996) can enter each of the six CVCV-templates. As a result, first, CVCVQ<sup>^</sup>, CVCVN<sup>^</sup>, and CVCV<sup>^</sup>ri showed parallel tendencies ( $F(2, 3) = 6.02, n.s.$ ), suggesting one common “suffixed” construction (CVCV-X). Second, significant ill-affinity for phonomimic roots was observed for CVCV-CVCV ( $\chi^2(1) = 10.83, p < .001$ ) and CVCCV<sup>^</sup>ri ( $\chi^2(1) = 10.83, p < .001$ ). This is compatible with their alleged “resultative” meanings. Third, 88% of mimetic roots that enter CVCV-CVCV can enter CV<sup>^</sup>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

- Goldberg, A. E. (1995) *Constructions: A construction grammar approach to argument structure*. Chicago: UCP.  
Hamano, S. (1998) *The sound-symbolic system of Japanese*. Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications.  
Kakehi, H., Tamori, I., & Schourup, L. (1996) *Dictionary of iconic expressions in Japanese*. Berlin/NY: Mouton.

## List of Technical Terms

Construction: A “form-meaning pair  $\langle F_i, S_i \rangle$  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).