Ideophones and the Iconicity of Motion Event Descriptions

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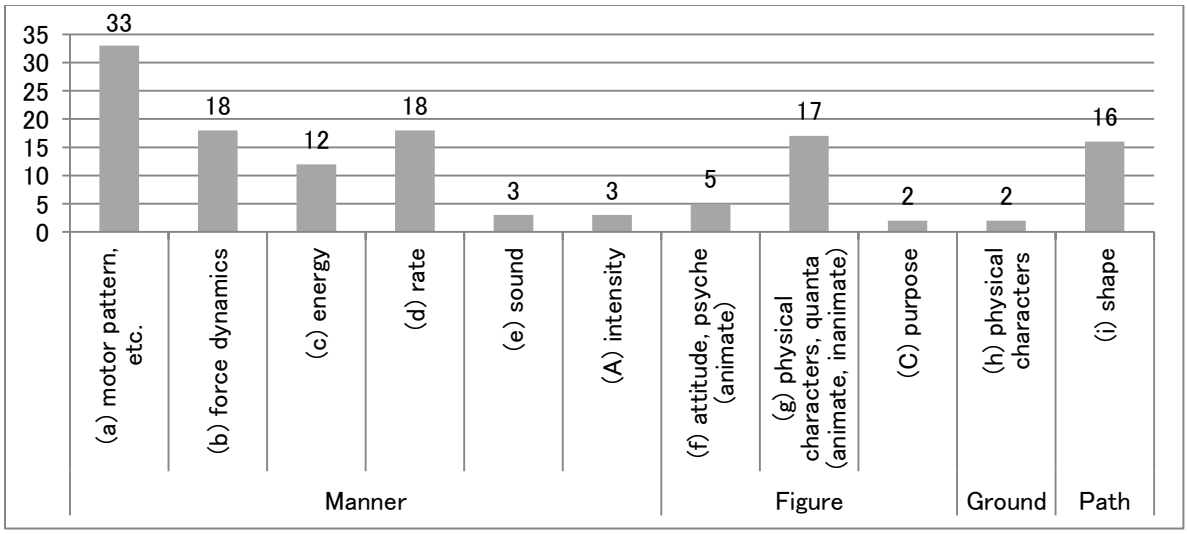
Ideophones (also known as mimetics and expressives) are iconic lexemes in spoken language. They are particularly abundant in several languages, including Japanese, and can express both auditory (e.g., bowwow, crunch) and non-auditory information (e.g., nikoniko 'smiling', gakkari 'disappointed' (Japanese)). Ideophones also depict various aspects of spatial motion events, such as rate, motor pattern, affect, and path's shape (Hinton et al. 1994; Schaefer 2001; Ibarretxe-Antuñano 2006; Toratani 2012). This paper discusses what aspects of motion events are and are not expressible by Japanese ideophones and why.

Using a slightly extended version of Toratani's (2012) coding scheme for 15 Japanese motion ideophones ("movement imitatives" in Hinton et al.'s 1994 terms), I conducted a semantic coding for 45 Japanese motion ideophones taken from Kakehi et al. (1996). The results shown in the following figure, which are consistent with previous studies (Ibarretxe-Antuñano 2006; Toratani 2012), are more or less understandable in terms of the iconicity of sounds and sound patterns (Hamano 1998).



For example, the initial voiceless fricative of sosokusa 'in a hurry', sugosugo 'leaving dejectedly, and sutasuta 'walking briskly' sound-symbolically mimics quick motion (rate). The two repeated voiceless stops of tokotoko 'walking with short steps' iconically correspond to the rhythmic short steps expressed (motor pattern). The voiced initial and the root-medial voiceless velar stop of dokat(-to) 'thumping' are phonosemantically associated with heaviness and hardness (figure's physical characteristics). The /g/-/r/ combination of gurut(-to) 'moving around' imitates a large circle (path's shape). The auditory iconicity of ideophones may also account for the relative rarity of ideophones specifying attitude/psyche and purpose. These abstract concepts are harder to "mimic" by icons (Perniss et al. 2010; Meir et al. 2013).

The nature of sound symbolism further explains the semantic range and limits of “expressive” features of ideophones. Japanese ideophones have a set of systematic morphological and prosodic operations that depict the minute details of manner and property (Kita 1997; Hamano 1998; Nasu 2002). For example, guruguruguruuut(-to) (< gurut(-to) ‘moving around’), which illustrates partial multiplication and vowel lengthening, represents a motion event involving three (or more) circles and a long distance, and guruguruguruuuuut(-to) represents an even longer distance. Due to the auditory nature of ideophonic iconicity, these expressive features allow us to be highly precise in some semantic dimensions related to sound, such as the quality and duration of motion-induced sound and the distance of motion, but not for many non-auditory dimensions, such as the degree of an angle and the shape of path. For example, no expressive feature would help the ideophone ziguzagu ‘zigzagging’ to represent the exact degree of the angles involved in a zigzag path. This is where the visual iconicity of signed language achieves greater precision.

In summary, the auditory nature of the iconicity of ideophones both motivates and limits the possible variety and specificity of their meanings. This general observation will benefit from a systematic lexical-semantic comparison between ideophones and signed language, which involves visual iconicity.

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