

Quantitative Studies of Onomatopoeic words in Japanese and English



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● Research Outline

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Onomatopoeia is a special language expression because its phonological form appears to be more directly associated with its meaning. Onomatopoeic words can convey imaginative, animated, and picturesque meanings that ordinary (i.e. non-onomatopoeic) words do not indicate. Unfortunately, onomatopoeia (especially in English) is one of the most undeveloped fields at the present day (Tamori and Schourup 1999: 1). In fact, onomatopoeia has been regarded as a “peripheral, immature, unnecessary, or less-linguistic” (Schourup 1993: 52; my translation) phenomenon in Europe and the United States, and little attention has been given to it. This tendency can date back to the argument by Saussure that onomatopoeia is not an element of language systems, and the number of onomatopoeic words is very small (Saussure 1972: 102). It is interesting to note, however, that while some languages (like English) possess a relatively small number of onomatopoeic words, other languages possess a great deal of them. For instance, Japanese is said to have approximately 2000 to 4500 onomatopoeic words (Yamaguchi 2003, Ono 2007). In Japanese, onomatopoeic words play an important role in everyday conversation and in works of literature as well (Tamori and Schourup 1999: 1).

One important question that naturally arises is why some languages (such as Japanese) possess a large number of onomatopoeic words while in other languages (such as English) the number is far smaller. How is the number of onomatopoeic words in a language related to other lexical or grammatical aspects of that language?

A detailed survey of the onomatopoeic system of a language like English, in terms of grammar and/or actual usage, may provide a basis for answering this important question; it may also lead to a comprehensive survey of onomatopoeia across languages.

