Preferences in Production of Utterances by Japanese Speakers

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Introduction

When it comes to describing an event or objects, natural languages allow speakers to use a variety of word classes to build this description outside of its crucial components: for example, adjectives and adverbs. For a number of natural languages, however, lexical classes are not restricted to solely giving descriptions. Ideophones fulfill such a role, providing not a description but a depiction to the speaker and their hearer.

There are many languages in the world that count with their own ideophonic inventory which, although widely popular in some languages, many of these possess undefined constraints and unidentified characteristics due to a lack of research. Our focus in this paper will be on the ideophones of the Japanese language, which is exemplified in (1):

1. フワフワ-の-カモ=は　　泳-いで-いる。

   fuwafuwa-no-kamo=wa　　oyo-ide-iru

   fluffy(IDEO)-POSSESSIVE-duck=TOP　　swim-CONJ-prog

   'The (fluffy) duck is swimming'

Here, the ideophone フワフワ in the noun phrase elicits the image of a "fluffy duck" thanks to the use of the nominalizing の particle. In many noun phrases, the depiction of an ideophone is attached to the description of a noun by the occurrence of the nominalizing particle. A similar thing can be observed in verb phrases too, only this time the ideophone directly attaches itself to the verb. As Dingemanse and Akita best describe it, "To say that ideophones are depictions is to say that they are a form of mimesis rather than diegesis, that is they show rather than tell, they perform rather than merely inform " (5). For Japanese ideophones, this is

especially true as studies have shown there is a sound-symbolism system in place for Japanese ideophones.

Japanese Ideophones are divided into two main categories: Non-Onomatopoeic ideophones and Onomatopoeic ideophones. In the Non-Onomatopoeic category, there are two subcategories: 擬態語 “gitaigo” which are imitated physical-state words and 擬情語 “gijougo” defined as imitated emotion words. In the Onomatopoeic category, there are also two subcategories: 擬声語 “giseigo” which are imitated voice words (this is where you find mimetics such as the sound a dog makes when it barks, the most widely known type of ideophone) and 擬音語 “giongo” defined as imitated sound words or sounds objects produced.

Among all these depictions though, from alluding to the emotions individuals experience to the physical state of certain objects, there remains a common variable among Japanese ideophones–motion. Take for instance the ideophone キラキラ ‘kirakira’ which means twinkling. When you think of something twinkling, we usually think of sparkles coming in and out from our line of vision. No twinkle is ever permanent or stationary, but a temporary thing which tends to move from place to place. The same thing can be said for the ideophone ワクワク ‘wakuwaku’ which means excited or thrilled. When thinking of someone who is excited, you hardly picture them immobile. Rather, when you describe an excited individual, they tend to be someone with high levels of energy characterized by a rapid flow of speech or movement.

Ideophones, adjectives, and adverbs do, however, equally possess the ability to provide a more vivid description outside of the compulsory noun and verbs. In this study, we focus on usage of these three lexical classes by Japanese speakers in the production of utterances. The goal of this study is therefore to explore whether Japanese speakers prefer the use of ideophones

in an in-motion context over adjectives and adverbs. Additionally, we hope to shed some light on the parameters surrounding ideophone usage by speakers.

Experiment

In this experiment, we ask whether Japanese speakers prefer the use of ideophones when describing an event in motion over adjectives and adverbs. This question arises from the fact that ideophones are depictors and not descriptors, therefore, inherently describing some type of movement. If so, this would suggest an explanation for the prevalence of ideophone usage in Japanese speakers. If not, this finding would suggest that the usage of Japanese ideophones within utterances is more complex than simply being suited to the situation.

Design and Materials

In this experiment, participants were asked to provide 1-2 sentence descriptions of eight separate video clips. A total of eight five-second clips were used: four fillers and four experimental items across one independent factor. The independent factor for experimental items was whether the motion in the clip was active or passive. Active motion was defined as when the object(s) in motion occupied the foreground of the shot. On the other hand, Passive motion was defined as when the object(s) in motion occupied the background. The figures below show an example of these items.

Figure 1. Example of an *Active* Experimental Item

Figure 2. Example of *Passive* Experimental Item

The filler items were designed to contain both active and passive motion. A total of four filler items were used.

The source of these clips is a film titled *The Pear Story*, a film produced by Wallace Chafe in 1975. The film was designed to analyze how different cultures recount narratives

through their language, based on a language-less stimulus. A demonstration link to the experiment can be found here.

Procedure

Six self-reported Japanese speakers were recruited via social media and messaging apps. Each participant was presented with four experimental items and four filler items; the order of these randomized. All six participants described the eight clips in 1-2 sentences in Japanese. The experiment was conducted using PCIbex software.

Participants

Participants were volunteers, therefore, they received no form of compensation for their participation. While their gender was not recorded, participants had a mean age of 41.5 years and reported having lived in Japan for an average of 24.83 years. Additionally, all but one of our participants were first-language (L1) speakers of Japanese. No participants were discarded from our data.

Predictions

For this experiment, we present two hypotheses: 1) ideophones are preferably used by participants in their descriptions for both active and passive experimental items, and 2) ideophones are used in more than one way (i.e. acts according to more than one lexical class).

Results and Discussion

The goal of this experiment was to evaluate whether Japanese speakers would preferably use ideophones in their utterance production within an in-motion context. The results of our experiment do not support our hypothesis.

The processing of our data was done both manually and through the use of RStudio. Manually, the row names were identified, numerical count of ideophones, adverbs, and adjectives were made, translations to the descriptions were provided, and unnecessary rows were deleted. Using RStudio, relevant rows were isolated for data analysis.

During the analysis of our data, no ideophone or adverb was used by the participants but for one adjective. This adjective was 赤い 'red' and it was used for an Active-motion experimental item. Given the lack of usage, no statistical analyses were conducted. However, a histogram visualizing the age range of our participants was possible. This figure can be found below.

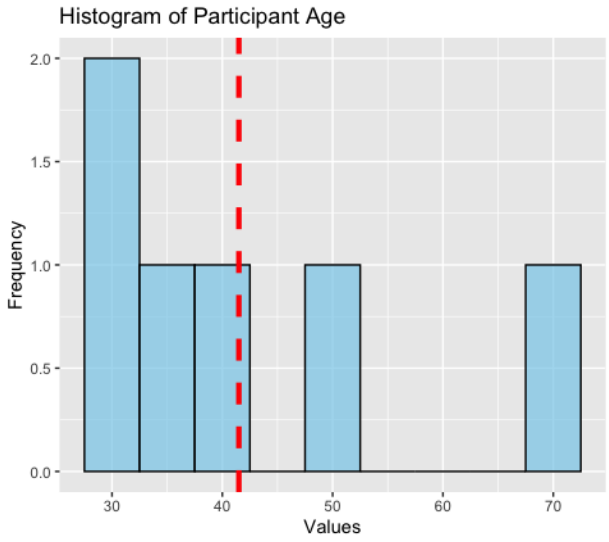

Figure 3. Age Range of Participants with the Mean Age (red-dotted line)

We set out to explore the preferences of Japanese speakers in utterance production, in part by evaluating their descriptions of five-second video clips. This experiment sought to demonstrate that speakers held a preference for ideophones in production of utterances when motion was present, mainly due to ideophones functioning as depictors rather than descriptors.

Whereas we theorized that ideophone usage would outrank adverbial and adjectival usage, no usage was found within the participants' responses saved for one adjective entry.

In hindsight, we suspect this may be due to our participants' demographic and the video clips' source material. Initially, we suspected that the age of our participants played a major role, as there's the possibility that ideophone usage may correlate with age. However, given the widespread use of ideophones within Japanese speakers' daily lives, this seems improbable. On the other hand, we suspect that *the Pear Film* did not provide the visual stimuli to encourage the use of descriptors. Additionally, having been produced in 1975, the quality of *the Pear Film* was not of suitable quality for close observation. Participants had a difficult time identifying subjects within the clips, evidenced by the several references to horses in their descriptions when the only animal shown was a goat.

Perhaps a similarly designed film, accompanied by bright colors, improved quality, and scenarios where participants are required to make a distinction between subjects, could encourage participants to make a greater use of descriptors. This idea is supported by the sole descriptor used by participants–the adjective 赤い 'red'–being an easily identifiable trait and being located in the foreground of the shot. As a result, identifying better visual stimuli and recruiting a participant group with a wider age range seems preferable for future studies. Another possibility is to increase the size of the canvas in our experiment, enabling us to also increase the size of the video when in display.

As noted earlier, our hypothesis of ideophone usage outranking adverbial and adjectival is not supported by our findings. However, we do point out that given that ideophones are vastly

under-researched, this experiment succeeds in highlighting important design and material considerations for future endeavors.

References

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