The Acquisition of the Constraint on Mimetic Verbs in Japanese and Korean

This paper claims that the acquisition of the verbal use of Japanese and Korean sound-symbolic words (henceforth “mimetics”) is that of a semantic/syntactic constraint on it. I will thus suggest that the two languages show a systematic parallelism not only in their well-organized sound-symbolic, phonosemantic systems (Garrigues 1995) but also in their grammars of such words.

First, an observation of the grammaticality contrasts in (1) offers us a generalization: highly iconic mimetics cannot form a verb in combination with the verb suru ‘to do’ in Japanese and the suffix -kōri-da or the verb hada ‘to do’ in Korean. The high iconicity of Japanese sutasuta and tekuteku in (1b), for instance, can be confirmed by gestures accompanying the utterances of them. In my simple experiment, among 13 native speakers, 9 and 13 synchronized one footstep-imitating hand gesture with each mimetic root (e.g., suta of sutasuta) of sutasuta and tekuteku respectively, while 2 for tyorotyoro and urouro.

This semantic constraint, however, does not hold for child language. Kageyama (2004) notices that, among his seven lexical-semantic types of Japanese mimetic verbs, only “ACT-ON verbs” in (2), which usually refer to sounds of contact, sound childish. All my 8 informants agreed upon his intuition, and Internet research revealed that these verbs are much less frequently used than the other types. Intriguingly, Korean ACT-ON mimetic verbs in (2) also create childishness. Note that this effect does not occur when these mimetics are used adverbially as in (3). These facts imply that the above constraint is weaker in children.

Nevertheless, a closer look at child language supersedes this hypothesis by another. As Osaka (1999) shows, children acquire mimetics of sounds (phonomimes) before mimetics of external information (phenomimes) and those of internal experiences (psychomimes). This means that child language does not have abstract, poorly iconic mimetics for which adult language employs the mimetic verb form. Under such vocabulary circumstances, the constraint itself would not be called for.

Following Tsujimura’s (to appear) preliminary investigation of Noji’s (1973-77) diary record of his monolingual Japanese child named Sumihare (containing his 40,000 utterances or so; 0;1 to 7;1), I conducted a comprehensive analysis of his mimetic verbs by reading the whole data. As Tsujimura remarks, the result in Figure 1 manifestly shows that the development of normal mimetic verbs follows the frequent use of an immature mimetic verb form called “innovative mimetic verbs.” What is crucial here are Figures 2 and 3, where most of his mimetic verbs, both normal and innovative, are phonomimic, mostly depicting iconic sounds. Thus, Sumihare’s mimetic verb forms are indeed fairly free from the constraint at issue.

The constraint also has a syntactic aspect: it prohibits high transitivity (cf. (4) from Kageyama (2004)). Among Kageyama’s seven types, only ACT-ON verbs are transitive, taking accusative marked NPs. In other words, child language allows even transitive mimetic verbs, which as mentioned above tend to encode particular sounds. Thus, mimetic verbs acquisition requires Japanese/Korean children to acquire the semantic/syntactic constraint that hates high iconicity and transitivity, which can correlate.
Examples
(1) a. Japanese/Korean mimetics of sounds:
[most: highly iconic] *buubuu-suru/*bungbung{-kōrida/-hada} ‘to zoom-zoom’, *hyunbyun-suru/
*sseenssasang{-kōrida/-hada} ‘to swirl’
[rare: abstract] zazawaza-suru/wagūwagū{-kōrida/-hada} ‘to hum’

b. Japanese/Korean mimetics of walking:
[highly iconic] *sutasuta-suru/*chongchong{-kōrida/-hada} ‘to walk briskly’, *tekuteku-suru/*ttōkttōbók
{-kōrida/-hada} ‘to walk lightly and rhythmically’
[abstract] tyorotyoro-suru/chyolang{-kōrida/-hada} ‘to run around’, urouro-suru/ōsorōng{-kōrida/-hada} ‘to loiter’

(2) Japanese/Korean ACT-ON mimetic verbs:
dondon-suru/kūngkūng{-kōrida/hada} ‘to pound’, huuhuu-suru/huuhu{-kōrida/hada} ‘to blow’, tonton-suru/takak-
{kōrida/hada} ‘to tap’, tuntun-suru/kukkuk{-kōrida/hada} ‘to touch with a stick or finger’

(3) a. Japanese: tonton-suru (childish) vs. tonton tataku ‘to tap tonton’ (not childish)
b. Korean: takak-kōrida (childish) vs. takak diidurida ‘to tap takak’ (not childish)

(4) To mean ‘to swing one’s hands’:
\[ \text{te o burabura-suru} \] (childish) \[ \rightarrow \text{te o burabura-saseru} \] (more natural)
hand ACC MIMETIC-do hand ACC MIMETIC-make do

Note on Figure 1: Frequency is the percentage of the conversation examples containing one or more mimetic verbs uttered by Sumihare out of the total examples during each period.

References