

Onomatopoeia: A Comparative Study of Usage, Awareness and Perception between American and Japanese University Students

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Abstract

Onomatopoeia is used in any country, especially in Japan which is necessary for daily life and it used frequently. However the usage and perceptions of onomatopoeia are different between Japan and America. In this capstone I investigated how onomatopoeia usage, awareness and perceptions are different between Japanese and American university students using a survey. As a result I found that Japanese students have a stronger awareness of onomatopoeia than Americans. In terms of the daily usage of onomatopoeia, it is important to both Japanese and Americans for daily life, however, Japanese tend to use onomatopoeia with friends, children and family while Americans tend to use more with friends and children but not as much with family. Perceptions vary between Americans and Japanese; however a majority of Japanese overall agrees on how onomatopoeia is perceived.

Introduction

With so many languages used around the world, it is not uncommon to find differences of specific words that describe sounds, actions, feelings, and states of being. These words are called onomatopoeia. In Japan there is a huge pool of onomatopoeia to choose from. America has a fraction of onomatopoeia in comparison. Japanese have been using onomatopoeia for centuries and is part of their daily culture and language. Americans use onomatopoeia as well; however the amount they use is very different from Japanese. So, what is difference between the two countries? How are specific elements different? To know the answer to these questions we look at the usage, awareness, and perceptions to find out.

1. Significance of Study

While studying Japanese at CSUMB, I noticed Japanese exchange students used many different onomatopoeia quite often. So I thought to myself, how often and within what situations is onomatopoeia used? I became interested in if American students used just as many onomatopoeia, and if they were aware of onomatopoeia usage at all. This also led me to investigate what perceptions both Japanese and American students hold as well. I hope to discover the answers to these questions through observation, research and surveys. Hopefully this study will help advocate the importance of understanding more than just one language,

because onomatopoeia has been an instinctive part of communication for a long time. In the end, it is about understanding and if we can connect through language and know processes that influence onomatopoeia, we can better understand each other.

2. Research Questions

- 1) How is onomatopoeia usage and awareness different between Japanese and American university students?
- 2) How is the perception of using onomatopoeia different between Japanese and American university students?

3. Research background

3.1 What is Onomatopoeia?

For an American definition of onomatopoeia it is a way of expressing a particular sound that does not have a vocabulary (Bredin, 1996). Also it is the formation of a word from a sound associated with what is named (e.g., cuckoo, sizzle,) (Oxford English Dictionary, 2015).

For Japanese the definition is words that describe sounds, often simple phonetic combinations of letters (urban dictionary, 2015). However it is broken up into two specific groups, giongo and gitaigo. Giongo includes sounds of animals, humans, and actions. Gitaigo includes sounds of feelings or certain states of being (Tofugu, n.d.)

3.2 Examples and Types of Onomatopoeia

The types of onomatopoeia are specifically defined under the Japanese definitions stated above. They are words that describe animal sounds, human sounds, actions, feelings and states of being. The latter two types are much more difficult to find among the small amount of onomatopoeia in the English language. Here are some examples of each type both in Japanese and English. Note that the onomatopoeia that follows the English one will be the equivalent in Japanese. 1. Animals; a cat says meow, nyaa-nyaa. 2. Human; when a person chews food it sounds like nom-nom-nom, mushya-mushya. 3. Action; a ball falling on your head sounds like boink, bon, 4. Feeling or state of being; when there is a close call or finishing a hard task some people say phew, fu. If you look for onomatopoeia describing feelings and states of being in the English language, you will find few to none.

3.3 Onomatopoeia Usage

According to a dissertation written in 2010 by Takashi Sugahara, he was able to gather around 278 onomatopoeias from an Oxford English dictionary. Another source puts the estimate around 270 as well (Onomatopoeia Dictionary, 2015).

Out of a Japanese dictionary of 500,000 words around 5,000 are onomatopoeia. That is one percent. One word out of 100 is onomatopoeia. However, there are still many others that haven't been printed due to them being out of date or forgotten (オノマトペラボ, 2015).

4. The Study

4.1 Demographics

In this study, I surveyed 58 university students. This includes 29 Japanese (8 male, 21 female), and 29 American (14 male, 15 female) students.

4.2 Research Method

Data was collected through online English and Japanese surveys.

5. Research Question 1 Findings

The next few survey results will focus on research question 1. How is onomatopoeia usage and awareness different between Japanese and American university students?

5.1 Frequency of Usage

The question was: how often do you use onomatopoeia in the following situations. American students most often use onomatopoeia with children, friends, and singing songs. Japanese students most often use onomatopoeia with friends, children and family.

5.2 Awareness

The question from the survey was: how aware are you of the onomatopoeia that you use in the following situations. There were 7 common situations for the participants to choose from. Only the top 3 were of most significance. American students are most aware of onomatopoeia when used with children, the public, and friends. Japanese students are most aware of onomatopoeia when used with family, friends, and children.

5.3 Influences

The question was: from the following, what influences your onomatopoeia? Out of 13 choices only the top 3 were chosen for comparison. Americans are most influenced by cartoons/anime, friends, comics/manga. Also, there is a small percentage that believes specific elements are “not applicable” and “strongly disagree” about influences. Japanese are most influenced by friends, family, and manga. Also, under “strongly disagree” and “n/a,” there were zero responses.

5.4 Summary of Findings for Research Question 1

In general Japanese students have more awareness and usage compared to Americans by comparing specifically the results of the survey questions listed before. Both Japanese and Americans often use onomatopoeia with children and friends, however Japanese show high usage with family as well. American students show onomatopoeia is most influenced by cartoons, friends, and comics while Japanese are most influenced by friends, family, and manga. Also, Japanese see “region” as a large part of their influence as well. Americans did have a small percentage of students that found some of the influences to be “strongly disagreed” and “not applicable,” however, Japanese had no responses at all lower than “disagree”. There are some small similarities of responses but an overall look between the data shows a strong finding that Japanese are definitely more aware of and use onomatopoeia more than Americans.

6. Research Question 2 Findings

Survey results for research question 2. How is the perception of using onomatopoeia different between Japanese and American university students?

6.1 Childish or Mature

The question was: from the following, which do you feel are more mature or childish. The selection consisted of 10 onomatopoeias which covered the handful of types defined by giongo and gitaigo. Americans perceive that five out of the ten onomatopoeia shown are “slightly mature” to “mature.” Also, nom-nom-nom, choo-choo, and boink show the highest percentage of being childish. Japanese perceive that “Phew” is the most mature out of the ten shown. However, the majority of onomatopoeia remaining is closely divided between being “neither” or “slightly childish” and “childish”. The black oval shows the majority of responses from Japanese students.

6.2 Individual Importance

The question: How important is onomatopoeia to you? Both Japanese and American students show high percentages of importance for onomatopoeia. However, Japanese students have a higher combined response of being important and very important.

6.3 Reasons Onomatopoeia is used

The question: What are the reasons why you would use onomatopoeia? A large percentage of Americans find “describing feelings and emotions,” “emphasis,” and “describing sounds” to be the most popular reasons. Japanese find “describing feelings and emotions,” “shock and awe,” and “describing sounds” to be the most popular.

6.4 Summary of Findings for Research Question 2

Japanese find onomatopoeia to be neither mature nor childish. Japanese and American students both find onomatopoeia to be important. Describing feelings and emotions, and describing sounds are similar reasons to use onomatopoeia for Japanese and Americans. However, Japanese also picked shock and awe while Americans picked emphasis as reasons as well.

7. Conclusion

Onomatopoeia is found throughout the world. Not every country uses the same ones. Americans have a much smaller amount of onomatopoeia to choose from in comparison to Japanese. The survey data shows that Japanese have more usage and awareness than Americans by comparing specific situations and types of onomatopoeia. More Japanese consistently responded within areas concerning awareness and usage than Americans. Some of the perceptions of onomatopoeia were similar, like “reasons” and “importance”, however Japanese still showed more responses within questions about perceptions as well.

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