Kirakira Words against Kotsukotsu Effort: Sound-Symbolism as a tool for learning How are Japanese mimetics introduced and taught in widely used Japanese language textbooks?

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Kirakira Words against *Kotsukotsu* Effort: Sound-Symbolism as a tool for learning

How are Japanese mimetics introduced and taught in widely used Japanese language textbooks?

MA Thesis

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Introduction

Language is often viewed as arbitrary, yet in some cases the sound of a word can hint at its meaning: a phenomenon known as sound-symbolism. Japanese, in particular, has a large amount of sound-symbolic words, commonly referred to as mimetics (or ideophones), that form a highly expressive part of its lexicon. These mimetic words encode sensory and psychological nuances through sound. Unlike most Indo-European languages, where mimetic words are relatively limited, Japanese uses a vast range of mimetics in everyday communication. Prior studies have demonstrated systematic links between certain phonetic patterns and specific meanings in Japanese mimetics (Akiyama et al., 2011; Shinohara & Kawahara, 2010). Notably, some of these sound–meaning combinations appear intuitive even to individuals with no exposure to Japanese, suggesting a degree of cross-linguistic recognizability in Japanese mimetic words.

Accumulating evidence indicates that sound-symbolism is not just a linguistic curiosity, but can actively help vocabulary acquisition in both first and second language learners (L1, and L2 language learners respectively). Even very young children seem sensitive to sound–meaning cues, as will be discussed later when talking about the Maurer et al. (2006) study, which implied that children perceive iconic relationships. Building on this, this thesis will also analyse the study done by Imai et al. (2008) and Imai and Kita (2014), which support the view that iconic cues can improve early word learning. Similar benefits seem to extend to L2 learning. Lockwood et al. (2016) demonstrated that adult L1 Dutch learners with no prior Japanese knowledge were significantly more successful in remembering the meanings of Japanese mimetic words than of comparable non-iconic words. These findings suggest that sound-symbolic words, even from an unfamiliar language, offer learners intuitive cues that aid in understanding and learning the meaning of those words.

This thesis builds on insights from my previous research done for my BA thesis, Japanese Mimetics and the Universality of Their Sound-Symbolism, which examined whether Japanese mimetic sound–meaning combinations are intuitive to non-Japanese speakers. In that BA-level study, Dutch participants with no knowledge of Japanese were given a two-alternative forced-choice task where they were asked to guess the meaning of Japanese mimetics, and they were able to guess the meanings of certain mimetics at rates significantly above chance. In other words, some sound–meaning combinations in Japanese appear to carry clues that even novice learners can pick up on. This outcome aligns with the distinction drawn by Saji et al. (2019) between language universal and language intrinsic sound-symbolism. The former refers to iconic relationships that are broadly recognizable across different linguistic backgrounds, whereas the latter relies on language-specific conventions (this concept is discussed further in the Background chapter.) The finding that some Japanese mimetics have cross-linguistic transparency not only deepened my interest in sound-symbolism, but also raised an important pedagogical question: if certain mimetic words inherently convey meaning to learners, and sound-symbolism can boost the learning of such words, are we then taking full advantage of them in Japanese language education?

Yet, despite growing evidence that sound-symbolism can support word learning, most research has focused on demonstrating whether this effect exists rather than how it can be harnessed, and little attention has been paid to practical applications in language teaching. Scholars who study Japanese mimetics mention their pedagogical implications, but it remains unclear to what extent these insights are reflected in actual teaching materials. In fact, mimetic expressions appear to be underrepresented in many Japanese textbooks, potentially because they are seen as too complex, too nuanced, or too context-dependent for learners (Hamano, 1986; Watanabe, 1997; Tsuchiya et al., 2012). In more anecdotal evidence, many learners themselves have stated that mimetics can be difficult and unintuitive to learn (Hamano, 1986). The cautious approach by textbooks may be a missed opportunity, given how commonplace mimetics are in Japanese, across both formal and informal contexts. If learners can intuitively grasp aspects of meaning from mimetic words, introducing these expressions early, even at the beginner level, and thoughtfully could serve as a useful aid in second-language vocabulary acquisition.

This thesis addresses that gap by investigating how Japanese mimetic words are introduced and taught in widely used Japanese language textbooks. The research comprises a literature review alongside a qualitative analysis of 4 popular Japanese beginner-level textbooks, examining how these materials present mimetics: which mimetic expressions they include, how they explain or contextualize these words (for instance, whether the sound–meaning link is highlighted), and in what kinds of exercises or contexts learners practice them. The ultimate goal is to assess whether current educational resources leverage the potential advantage learners have when learning mimetics, or whether they overlook the potential of mimetics as a learning tool. By mapping out current textbook practices and comparing them with insights from sound-symbolism research, this thesis seeks to shed light on how mimetics are presently taught and to suggest ways that these words might be more effectively taught to enhance L2 learners' vocabulary acquisition and overall understanding of Japanese mimetics.

Background

The introduction has outlined the core questions regarding Japanese mimetics, and the extent to which their sound-meaning relationships are intuitive to learners. This chapter aims to provide the theoretical background underpinning these questions. First, there is a need to clarify the concept of sound-symbolism in language and discuss how it manifests in Japanese mimetics. This includes a review of evidence for non-arbitrary sound-meaning associations and their role in language learning. This chapter then distinguishes between language universal versus language intrinsic dimensions of sound-symbolism, examining how some sound-meaning patterns might be universally perceived while others require language-specific knowledge. Finally, a brief section about other relevant previous research and previous endeavours on analysing textbooks will close off the chapter. This section will serve partially as rationale for this thesis, and partially as a setup to the following methodology chapter.

Sound-symbolism and Mimetics

Languages traditionally consist of arbitrary sound-meaning pairings, but sound-symbolism refers to cases where the sounds of a word bear a direct or suggestive connection to its meaning. In other words, the relationship between a word's sound and its meaning is, for some words, not completely random or arbitrary; instead, the sound itself evokes meaning. A classic example is the "*takete–maluma*" phenomenon, also known as the *bouba*/*kiki* effect. In a well-known experiment, people were shown two novel words, like *takete* and *maluma*, alongside two shapes (one with spikes, the other round). Participants across different linguistic backgrounds consistently matched *takete* with the jagged shape and *maluma* with the rounded shape. This cross-linguistic finding (first noted by Köhler in 1929/1930 and replicated many times since) suggests that certain sounds carry intrinsic meaning: the sounds of "*takete*" seem to connote something sharp or angular, whereas the sounds of "*maluma*" suggest something smooth and rounded. Sound-symbolism appears in a wide range of languages, indicating they may reflect broader human cognitive biases in linking sound and meaning.

What makes Japanese especially relevant in this context is its rich inventory of sound-symbolic words. These include not only true imitative, but also visual, tactile, and psychological, all of which fall under the umbrella of mimetics. Within this umbrella of mimetic words, Japanese distinguishes several subtypes based on the kind of phenomenon they describe. *Giongo* refers to mimetic words that mimic actual sounds (like *pon* for a small popping noise), while *Giseigo* refers specifically to vocal sounds made by living creatures (such as *wanwan* for a dog's bark). In addition, there are categories for non-auditory mimetics: *Gitaigo* represent physical sensations or visual states (for instance, *kirakira* "sparkling"), and *Gijougo* represent internal feelings or psychological states (such as *wakuwaku* "excited"). Many mimetic words appear in a characteristic reduplicated form (for example, *dokidoki* to signify a pounding heartbeat), though they can also occur in non-reduplicated forms like *yukkuri*, which means "slowly." Important to note is that Japanese mimetic words are not rare, not informal, and used by all ages; they are numerous and ingrained in daily speech. This makes Japanese an ideal testbed for exploring sound-symbolism: if sound-meaning correspondences can aid comprehension or learning, their effects should be observable in a language that uses iconic sound cues so extensively.

Research suggests that sound-symbolism is not just a quirky feature of some words, but that it may play a significant role in early L1 language acquisition (Imai et al., 2008; Imai & Kita, 2014; Maurer et al., 2006). Several studies demonstrate that even young children are sensitive to sound–meaning combinations. For instance, in an experiment by Maurer et al. (2006), two-and-a-half-year-old toddlers showed the same preference as adults for pairing *maluma*-like words with round shapes and *takete*-like words with spiky shapes. This early sensitivity suggests that sensitivity to sound-symbolic cues emerges in development and may aid initial concept formation. In fact, Imai and Kita (2014) propose a "sound-symbolism bootstrapping hypothesis," arguing that iconic sound–meaning combinations act as a scaffold for children's word learning by helping them narrow down possible meanings in ambiguous contexts.

Furthermore, earlier research supports this bootstrapping idea. Imai et al. (2008) found that 25-month-old Japanese toddlers learned and generalized a novel verb more effectively when it followed a mimetic pattern than when it had an arbitrary sound. The toddlers could extend the sound-symbolic verb to new contexts, but largely failed to do so with the arbitrary-sounding verb. These results provide support for the sound-symbolism bootstrapping effect in language acquisition: having an iconic link between a word's form and its meaning can indeed offer extra cues that facilitate the learner's acquisition of mimetic vocabulary (Imai et al., 2008; Imai & Kita, 2014).

When we turn to adult second language learners, however, Japanese mimetics are often cited as a particularly challenging aspect of the vocabulary. Learners frequently report that these words are hard to remember or interpret (Hamano, 1986). This is a sentiment echoed in many studies (e.g., Watanabe, 1997; Iesaka et al., 2014; Thuy, 2017). One of the reasons for this, is that new mimetic expressions are created by native speakers on a regular basis to capture novel nuances or sensations (Tsuchiya et al., 2012). This means the set of mimetics is open-ended, and mastering it is not as simple as memorizing a dictionary. Furthermore, the meaning of a mimetic is highly context dependent. A single form like *sarasara* can mean "smooth/slippery" in one context (e.g., hair texture) or "flowing fluidly" in another (e.g., water), and slight variations can change the nuance. Many languages (including English and Dutch) have relatively fewer mimetic words, so L2 learners might not be accustomed to paying attention to subtle sound cues in vocabulary. All these factors contribute to why Japanese mimetics can feel unintuitive to learners at first encounter, but perhaps it does not have to be this way.

Japanese mimetics have been the subject of numerous linguistic studies mapping which sounds correspond to which meanings. One finding is that consonants often carry a disproportionate share of the semantic "signal" in mimetics. Akiyama and Komatsu (2008), for example, emphasize that if we want to predict or explain a mimetic's meaning, paying attention to its consonant sounds is crucial. A frequently cited pattern concerns consonant voicing: voiced consonants (e.g. b, d, g, z) in Japanese mimetic words tend to be associated with perceptions of heaviness, hardness, or intensity, whereas voiceless consonants (p, t, k, s, h) correlate with lightness, softness, or delicateness. Empirical support for this comes from multiple sources. Hamano's (1986) pioneering analysis of Japanese sound-symbolism observed that words describing big or dull phenomena often contain voiced stops (e.g. *dogon* for a heavy boom), while those for small or sharp sensations use voiceless stops (e.g. *tokkin* for a sharp metallic sound). Similarly, Shinohara and Kawahara (2010) note that Japanese speakers consistently feel nonsense words with voiced consonants (like *buta*) sound "larger" or "heavier" than those with only voiceless consonants (like *pita*). A striking illustration of this sound-meaning link is reported by Kawahara and Monou (2017): they found that although voiced consonants occur in only about 5% of ordinary Japanese first names, over 50% of monster character names in the Ultraman TV series contain voiced consonants. Evidently, the creators intuitively chose sound-symbolic names with voiced sounds to connote "bigness" or formidable presence, aligning with native speakers' sound-meaning expectations.

Although Komatsu and Akiyama (2008) mention that consonants are the most important, vowels in Japanese mimetics still contribute, though perhaps in subtler ways. For instance, as explored by Shinohara and Kawahara (2010), the vowel /i/ (a high front vowel) is often associated with smallness or thinness, whereas /o/ and /a/ (low or back vowels) suggest largeness or broadness. This pattern has been observed in Japanese and other languages: words with *ee* or *ii* sounds feel smaller than words with *oo* or *aa* sounds. Shinohara and Kawahara's (2010) cross-linguistic experiment confirmed that Japanese and English speakers tend to judge novel words containing /i/ as referring to smaller objects than those containing /a/ or /o/. However, interestingly, the same study found that not all languages agree on this; Mandarin and Korean speakers in their sample did not show the same pattern. We will explore this idea of language universal vs. language intrinsic in the next subsection.

Lastly, it is important to acknowledge an emerging perspective that challenges an overly strong view of iconicity in mimetics. While Japanese mimetics are clearly iconic to some extent, they are still part of a conventional language system. Dingemanse et al. (2016) argue that mimetics are best understood under a "weak iconicity" hypothesis. They present evidence that, although mimetic words are more guessable than arbitrary words, they are not transparent transcriptions of experience, and there still remains a degree of arbitrariness in how they are used. Dingemanse et al.'s position is that mimetics combine iconic cues with language-specific usage patterns. This thesis adopts a similar stance. Although earlier research, like Imai et al. (2008), suggests that sound-symbolism can help in the acquisition of mimetic vocabulary, it is not as simple as learning the existing sound-meaning combinations, and then knowing all mimetic words and every possible nuance of them.

These findings show that iconic sound–meaning combinations can support mimetic vocabulary acquisition from an early age, and these associations are common in Japanese mimetics. Some Japanese mimetic words draw on systematic phonetic patterns, such as consonant voicing and vowel quality, to convey feelings and nuances. At the same time, it becomes clear that not all sound–meaning combinations are equally understood across languages. Some reflect broader human tendencies, while others depend on conventions specific to Japanese. This distinction between universal and intrinsic aspects of sound-symbolism will be the focus of the following chapter.

Language Universal, Language Intrinsic and Language learning

As mentioned above, not all sound-meaning combinations are shared between everyone; some seem to be language universal, while others are language intrinsic. A language universal sound-meaning combination in this context refers to a sound-meaning association that exists across multiple, if not all, languages. In other words, an iconic link that a human might perceive without prior exposure. The *takete*/*maluma* effect discussed above is a strong candidate for universality: people from various linguistic backgrounds make similar connections, implying a shared cognitive bias. However, as newer cross-linguistic experiments have shown, not everything is universal. For instance, the earlier mentioned Shinohara and Kawahara's (2010) experiment, which compared speakers of Japanese, English, Mandarin Chinese, and Korean, found a split in how different groups interpreted the size implications of vowels. Japanese and English participants showed similar tendencies (/i/ sounding "small", /a/ or /o/ sounding "large"). In contrast, Mandarin and Korean participants did not show the same bias. They may have relied on different cues or simply not shared the intuition that vowel quality correlates with physical size. This example illustrates that what we might assume to be a universal sound-symbolism can actually turn out to be language-specific upon closer inspection. It underscores the need to empirically test iconic perceptions across languages rather than assume they are general.

By language intrinsic sound-symbolism (sometimes called language-specific iconicity), this thesis means those sound-meaning links that require familiarity with a particular language to be appreciated. These can be shaped by a language's phonological system, culture, and history. In Japanese, for example, the association of voiced consonants with heaviness (and voiceless with lightness) discussed earlier is very easily noticeable to native speakers, and reinforced by countless words. A speaker of a language that lacks this pattern might not sense any inherent difference between voiced vs. voiceless sounds in Japanese words until they learn the vocabulary and develop sensitivity to the Japanese specific sound-symbolic combinations. Saji et al. (2019) introduce the terms primary iconicity and secondary iconicity. Primary iconicity refers to sound-meaning relations that are "readily perceivable without any prior knowledge", essentially, the universal ones. Secondary iconicity, on the other hand, refers to iconic sound cues that make sense only within language-specific conventions. A classic example of secondary iconicity is a word like Japanese *zāzā*, which means "the sound of rushing water or pouring rain." To a naive listener, *zāzā* might vaguely sound like "noise", but only a person familiar with Japanese mimetic norms would know that reduplication and the /za/ sound indicate continuous, heavy rainfall. The iconicity is partly intuitive but also partly learned through exposure to how Japanese represents rain sounds. In short, language intrinsic mimetics often build a system of symbolism that one has to learn to fully understand (much like idioms), even if some of their building blocks are universally motivated.

Empirical research supports the interplay of universal and intrinsic elements in Japanese sound-symbolism. The aforementioned study by Saji et al. (2019) took a novel "bottom-up" approach to elicit sound-symbolic intuition: instead of giving participants existing words to judge, they asked participants to create their own mimetic words. In the experiment, 30 Japanese native speakers and 27 English native speakers each watched a set of 70 video clips depicting different manners of locomotion (walking, running, jumping, etc.). After each clip, participants had to coin a word that, in their view, best imitated or described the action in the clip. The idea was to see whether Japanese and English speakers would independently make up similar-sounding words for the same actions (which would indicate some shared, universal sound-meaning mapping), or whether their creations would diverge in line with their respective language habits.

The results of Saji et al.'s (2019) study revealed that on the one hand, there were several cross-linguistically shared patterns. There were cases where Japanese and English speakers coined words with notably similar sounds to represent a given action, suggesting a common sound-meaning combination. On the other hand, Saji et al. also found clear language-specific tendencies. Japanese participants often produced mimetic words that incorporated sounds or structures typical of Japanese mimetics. In some instances, the Japanese group converged on using a particular sound sequence (say, a reduplicated form like *batabata* for someone running in a flustered way), whereas English speakers all came up with varying words. These uniquely Japanese responses suggest that the Japanese participants were drawing on their implicit knowledge of existing mimetic schemas. Essentially, secondary iconicity influenced by their language experience. The English speakers, lacking that schema, did not gravitate towards the same forms, even though they saw the exact same videos. Of course, the reverse is also true. Saji et al. (2019, p.19) interpret this as evidence that there is more to sound-symbolism than primary iconicity.

Another valuable study in this regard comes from Lockwood et al. (2016), who examined whether sound-symbolism can help adult learners acquire foreign vocabulary. In their experiment, native Dutch speakers (with no knowledge of Japanese) were taught a set of Japanese words, some of which were mimetics and others regular non-mimetic words, to see how well they could remember and recognize the meanings. For about half of the mimetic words, the researchers swapped the meanings during training. For example, teaching the Dutch participants that *fuwafuwa* (which actually means "fluffy") meant "woody," i.e. the opposite of its true meaning. This was done to test whether the participants would sense that something was "wrong". Overall, the Dutch learners learned the mimetic words better than the non-mimetic words. When given a multiple-choice test later, they correctly identified the meanings of the mimetic words more often, even when some had been initially taught with the wrong definitions, than the non-mimetic words. In other words suggesting that something about those words (presumably, their sound-symbolism) made them easier to understand and remember. Furthermore, participants who had been misled with opposite meanings for certain mimetics were often able to realize the mismatch: they could "sense" that, say, *fuwafuwa* was a better fit for a fluffy concept than for a woody concept, even though they had initially been taught the latter. This did not happen with non-mimetic words. If taught arbitrarily that (for example) *akarui* meant "dark" (opposite of its true meaning "bright"), learners had no innate sense that this was wrong, and their performance remained at chance levels. Lockwood et al.'s (2016) results support the idea that Japanese mimetics carry perceptible cues that L2 learners can pick up on, aiding them in acquisition. In essence, some sound-symbolic words sound like what they mean, enough that even novices can get a hint of the meaning, whereas non-mimetic words offer no such hint. This, then, begs the question: Is this phenomenon used in Japanese language education?

Lockwood et al. (2016) showed that mimetics are easier to understand and remember than non-mimetic words. In a study done by Nakata (2017), that will be explained in more depth later, a different experiment led to similar outcomes. Their experiment showed that L2 learners had better retention of mimetics than with non-mimetics. If these studies show that mimetics are easier to understand, easier to remember, and better retained than non-mimetics, than perhaps there is worth in introducing mimetics as early as possible. Therefore, a look at beginner-level textbooks where the easier to learn mimetics can benefit novice learners would be best suited for this thesis. An argument can be made that, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, if students struggle with interpreting and remembering mimetics, even though research indicates that they should actually be easier to interpret and remember, that current pedagogical approaches must be underutilizing the iconicity of mimetics. Early exposure and explicit guidance in beginner materials could potentially mitigate these struggles.

To summarize, the literature suggests a continuum between universal and language-specific sound-symbolism. Japanese mimetics clearly have language intrinsic iconicity, but they also tap into broader human sound–meaning combinations that even non-Japanese speakers can understand (language universal). These mimetic words then appear to be easier to understand and remember than non-mimetic words. Their perceived difficulty by L2 learners then does not reflect the results by earlier research, implying that perhaps the pedagogical methods are lacking in their instruction and/or exposure to mimetics. A look at beginner-level textbooks would allow this thesis to then assess whether mimetics are taught in the early stages of L2 acquisition.

Rationale for Research

As previously discussed, research demonstrates that sound-symbolism found in mimetic words can facilitate certain aspects of language learning, particularly the acquisition of mimetic vocabulary. Even very young first-language learners show sensitivity sound-symbolism, as could be seen in the previously talked about studies by Maurer et al. (2006) and Imai and Kita (2014). Similarly, Imai et al. (2008) showed that Japanese toddlers learned and generalized a new verb more effectively when it followed a mimetic sound pattern than when it was an arbitrary word. Such findings support the idea that having an iconic link between form and meaning can provide extra cues to aid the learning of such vocabulary. Of note here, is that this advantage seems not to be limited to L1 acquisition or children. Lockwood et al. (2016) and Nakata (2017) observed that adult second-language learners could memorize and recall Japanese mimetics significantly better than comparable non-iconic words. These learners even sensed when a mimetic word's taught meaning was mismatched. Together, these studies indicate that mimetic words can give learners an initial advantage in grasping and remembering their meanings, which is an edge that regular, non-mimetic words do not provide. This will be one of the most important sources for this thesis. If sound-symbolism indeed offers a boost to vocabulary learning, then to what extent do textbooks utilize this advantage?

Despite these aforementioned advantages existing, Japanese textbooks have been slow to capitalize on mimetics. Watanabe (1997) was among the first to systematically analyse how Japanese textbooks handle mimetics, and their findings revealed a clear gap in instruction. In a survey of popular textbooks, Watanabe found that mimetic words were largely ignored by textbook authors. This underrepresentation is striking given how common and useful mimetic expressions are in everyday Japanese. Watanabe showed that there was a clear lack of attention to mimetics in the teaching materials of the end of the last century. Watanabe warned that this omission could leave learners underexposed to mimetics. This thesis argues that depriving learners of these useful and common words is not only a waste, but it also hinders the learners in developing an ear for Japanese intrinsic sound-symbolisms.

Beyond identifying the problem, Watanabe (1997) also proposed new teaching methods. they proposed that instead of treating mimetics as isolated word list items (or ignoring them altogether), instructors should adopt more contextual and multisensory/multimodal teaching techniques. For example, teachers might use direct experiential methods, like incorporating gestures, dramatizations, or real objects, so that students can directly associate a mimetic word's sound with its meaning in a memorable context. However, it is important to note that Watanabe's study provided a snapshot of textbooks from the 1990s, and materials have undoubtedly evolved since then. This then opens the question of how widely such ideas were adopted in newer teaching resources. In the decades following, Japanese textbooks have changed in format and content, and new editions and series have emerged. Thus, a contemporary analysis is needed to see whether the gap identified by Watanabe persists or if modern textbooks have made progress in incorporating mimetics.

Recent studies provide newer insights on potential new teaching methods. Nakata (2017) found that English-speaking learners of Japanese who received explicit instruction on the sound-symbolic patterns of mimetic words (such as rules of voicing, gemination, and reduplication) showed significantly greater gains in acquiring and retaining mimetic vocabulary than learners who did not receive such instruction. Nakata (2017) also promoted similar ideas as Watanabe (1997), advocating for mimetics to be taught using illustrations, sounds, and other multisensory/multimodal teaching techniques, with the best scenario being an introduction with explicit instruction, followed by continuous exposure to mimetics. The findings from Nakata (2017) reinforce the rationale for examining whether the textbooks draw attention to mimetics, or simply treat them as ordinary vocabulary items, as it suggests that highlighting iconic cues can measurably benefit learners.

The demonstrated potential advantages of sound-symbolism on the acquisition of mimetic vocabulary, the historical lack of mimetics in textbooks, the anecdotal struggles of learners with interpreting and learning mimetics, and the suggestions from researchers on how to teach mimetics more effectively underscore the need for the present research. Accordingly, this thesis examines several key questions about contemporary textbook content and practices, including: (1) which mimetic expressions are introduced, and how frequently; (2) how these textbooks explain or contextualize mimetic words (for example, whether they note the iconic sound–meaning relationship or provide contextual examples); and (3) in what contexts or exercises learners encounter and practice these terms.

In summary, sound-symbolism has been shown to facilitate vocabulary acquisition of mimetic words in both first and second language learning (Maurer et al., 2006; Imai et al., 2008; Lockwood et al., 2016; Nakata, 2017). Furthermore, even learners with no prior exposure to Japanese, exhibit some sensitivity to the iconic sound–meaning combinations found in Japanese mimetic words (Dingemanse et al., 2016; Leijssen, 2023). However, previous textbook analyses (e.g., Watanabe, 1997) indicate that mimetic words have been underrepresented in Japanese textbooks. This difference between the pedagogical potential of mimetics, and their limited use in past textbooks leads to the research question: How are Japanese mimetics introduced and taught in widely used Japanese language textbooks?

Methodology

This thesis adopts a qualitative textbook analysis to investigate how Japanese mimetics are presented and taught in widely used Japanese language textbooks. In particular, the study examines four popular textbooks (from two beginner-level series), identifying all instances of mimetic expressions and evaluating how each is introduced to learners. The analysis will document distribution of mimetic words in these materials, examine whether and how their sound-symbolic nature is conveyed to learners, and assess how they teach each expression. A qualitative content analysis is appropriate, as the focus is on interpreting textbook content and instructional methods rather than testing learning outcomes directly. This chapter explains how textbooks were selected, what the analysis procedure and evaluation criteria were, and then concludes with a discussion of the study's limitations.

Textbook Selection

Four widely used Japanese language beginner-level textbooks were selected for analysis: Genki I & II and Minna no Nihongo Shokyuu I & II. These titles (two volumes from each series) are well-established textbooks for beginners in Japanese language education. They were chosen due to their popularity and influence in beginner-level instruction. Both Genki and Minna no Nihongo are among the most commonly used resources for learning Japanese. Focusing on these series provides insight into how mimetics are handled in materials that shape many learners' early exposure to Japanese. With this, this thesis hopes to capture common practices of teaching mimetic words in mainstream textbooks while keeping the analysis manageable and in-depth. Each of the selected volumes is designed for English-speaking learners (with English explanations or companion translations), which makes their content and approach comparable for the purposes of this research.

This thesis will be concentrating on beginner-level materials, as these textbooks often serve as learners' first structured encounter with Japanese. Earlier chapters have shown that mimetic words offer a learning advantage: studies by Lockwood et al. (2016) and Nakata (2017) found that second-language learners memorize and retain mimetics better than non-mimetic words. This suggests that exposing students to mimetics from the outset could provide a natural "sound-symbolism boost" to vocabulary acquisition, leveraging intuitive sound-meaning combinations to aid early vocabulary learning. If introductory textbooks underutilize mimetic vocabulary, they miss an opportunity to use these benefits at the very start of language learning, when the learner's vocabulary is still very limited and could benefit from easier to learn words. By focusing on beginner textbooks, this thesis examines whether these beginner resources harness or overlook the pedagogical potential of mimetics for beginners.

Textbook analysis

For each selected textbook, all chapters and relevant sections were systematically examined to identify occurrences of mimetic words. Using the criteria outlined in the Background chapter, any word functioning as a mimetic, albeit *gitaigo, giongo, giseigo, or gijougo*, was marked. This initial survey of the amount of different mimetics establishes a basis for comparing the coverage of mimetics between Genki and Minna no Nihongo. Then, seeing which types of mimetics are more common per textbook might provide an overview of what textbook makers see as more valuable mimetics for instruction.

Counting the amount of mimetics alone, however, does not capture how mimetic vocabulary is taught. Therefore, the analysis also evaluates the manner and depth of each mimetic's presentation to learners. Each identified mimetic is assessed along a spectrum of instructional detail, noting the following for each mimetic:

- **Translation only:** Is the mimetic presented merely with an English gloss or one-word translation, with no additional context or commentary?
- **Example provided:** Is the mimetic accompanied by an example of usage, such as a sample sentence, dialogue excerpt, or illustration that helps illustrate its meaning in context?
- **Contextually introduced:** Is the mimetic first introduced within a dialogue or narrative context (as opposed to appearing initially in an isolated vocabulary list)? In other words, do learners encounter the word in a situational setting that provides clues to its meaning before or alongside a formal definition?
- **Explicitly explained:** Does the textbook explicitly comment on the mimetic nature of the word? This could include a footnote, sidebar, or brief explanation indicating that the term is mimetic, and perhaps describing how its sound relates to its meaning or usage nuance.

These categories represent increasing levels of pedagogical support, from minimal (translation alone) to more comprehensive (contextual introduction and metalinguistic explanation). In practice, a given mimetic can have multiple features (for example, it might appear in a dialogue and be followed by an explanatory note). To organize the data, a matrix was created to log each mimetic along with these details. For each instance, the matrix records the mimetic term, the textbook and chapter in which it appears, and binary indicators for each of the above presentations. Additional notes capture any other relevant observations, such as the nature of the example or any cultural notes accompanying the word. This analysis allows for comparison across the four textbooks to reveal patterns in how mimetic words are introduced and explained.

It is worth noting that prior research suggests a potential benefit in drawing attention to sound–meaning relationships when teaching vocabulary, albeit through multimodal strategies like illustrations or gestures, or through explicit instruction, as was recommended by Watanabe (1997) and Nakata (2017). Studies have found that sound-symbolism can support the acquisition and retention of mimetic vocabulary (e.g., Maurer et al., 2006; Imai et al., 2008; Imai & Kita, 2014; Lockwood et al., 2016). Accordingly, the analysis pays special attention to whether each textbook leverages these potentially easier words to build the learner's early vocabulary quicker. All observations from the textbook analysis are documented in the last chapter of this thesis, including the full matrix of mimetic data.

Additionally, pseudo-mimetics will not be included in the analysis. Though the distinction between regular mimetics and pseudo-mimetics remains an ongoing debate, referring to the research by Bomers (2021), a fairly significant difference in iconicity between the two was observed. Pseudo-mimetics are words that look and behave like mimetics, but are different in origin. They seem to be adapted Japanese words or Chinese loanwords that rely solely on people being familiar with their smaller parts. Examples are: *nakanaka* ("very", "considerably"), *dandan* ("gradually"), and *hiyahiya* ("anxious"). Since these do not originally come from mimetic backgrounds, with limited iconicity, their inclusion would not provide any additional detail.

Limitations

As with any qualitative content analysis, this methodology involves subjective judgment. Determining what constitutes an adequate explanation or context for a mimetic can be interpretive, even when criteria are established. In short, there is an undeniable element of researcher interpretation in judging the presentation of mimetics, and the findings are intended as a descriptive account rather than an objective metric of effectiveness.

Another limitation is that the analysis is confined to the content of the textbooks themselves. This thesis examines how mimetics are presented on the page, but it does not capture how teachers or learners might actually use these textbooks in a classroom setting. In practice, instructors adapt or supplement the material, for instance, by providing additional examples, skipping certain sections, or elaborating on cultural points. Learners' understanding can be influenced by such classroom interactions. These factors are beyond the scope of this research. Therefore, the conclusions drawn are about the textbooks' intended pedagogical design, rather than how effectively mimetics are taught in live instruction. The analysis speaks to what the textbook authors and publishers have provided for the learner, assuming the material is followed as written, and does not account for any external input from teaching or self-study practices.

The sample of textbooks selected for review is also limited in scope. By focusing on two series (Genki and Minna no Nihongo) at the beginner/intermediate level, this thesis covers only a subset of the Japanese language textbooks available. These four volumes are broadly representative of mainstream introductory Japanese textbooks in the English learning context, but they do not encompass the full range of pedagogical approaches. In summary, this narrow sample provides an analysis for the chosen texts, but the results should not be overgeneralized to all Japanese language textbooks or learning contexts.

Finally, it should be noted that this study is analytical and comparative in nature; it does not measure the actual learning outcomes of students using these textbooks. Any evaluations or critiques of the textbooks' approaches (for example, suggesting that providing context or explicit explanations for mimetics could benefit learners) are based on insights from prior research, not on experimental data gathered in this thesis. In other words, the effectiveness of techniques is inferred from the literature on sound-symbolism and second language acquisition, rather than tested here. The aim of the methodology is to map current textbook practices and highlight areas where sound-symbolic principles might be underutilized or could be applied more effectively.

Despite these limitations, the chosen approach offers a valuable overview of how major textbooks handle Japanese mimetic words. It identifies which mimetic expressions appear, examines how they are presented and/or explained to learners, and evaluates the degree of attention given to their iconic nature. These insights can inform future pedagogical developments by revealing current gaps and good practices in teaching Japanese mimetics.

Results

Minna no Nihongo

The Minna no Nihongo series (Shokyuu volumes I and II) introduces only a very small number of mimetic expressions, namely 29, and these are scattered in later lessons with minimal support. In Shokyuu I, the analysis identified five clear mimetic words: *sorosoro* (“soon; gradually”), *yukkuri* (“slowly/calmly”), *gikkuri* (in the fixed phrase *gikkuri-goshi* for “sudden [lower-back] strain”), *bikkuri* (“surprised; startled”), and *perapera* (“fluent; speaking fluently”). These few items represent only about 1% of the total new vocabulary in Shokyuu I. Shokyuu II follows a similar pattern at first, adding only a handful of additional mimetics, except for in one chapter that will be discussed later. Moreover, mimetic words tend to appear only in mid-to-late chapters, with virtually none in the introductory lessons. In other words, learners using Minna no Nihongo are not exposed to mimetics until relatively far into the course, and even then such words are rare.

Mimetics are few in number, and their presentation is limited and minimally contextualized. In both Shokyuu I and II, mimetics are treated mostly like any other vocabulary item. Four of the five mimetics in Shokyuu I, for example, were introduced via a simple gloss in a vocabulary list. The textbook provides an English translation, and a phrase to either read or write in the workbook. Some of these words are then seen once in an example sentence or dialogue, but often without any elaboration. For instance, *sorosoro* is taught only as part of the set phrase *sorosoro shitsurei-shimasu* (“I should be going soon”) with a translation of the whole phrase. No additional comment is made on *sorosoro* itself, and aside from one repeat of the same phrase in an exercise, the word isn’t practiced further. Similarly, *yukkuri* appears as a basic adverb (“slowly”) in a practice sentence, but beyond that usage its meaning isn’t expanded on. In these cases the mimetic nature of the word is never acknowledged. They are presented as ordinary words, with no hint of their iconicity.

Several mimetics in Minna no Nihongo receive no contextual example at all. In Shokyuu I, *gikkuri* appears only within a compound (the medical term *gikkuri-goshi* for a back strain) in a supplementary part of the chapter and is translated in a footnote but never used in a sentence of its own. *Bikkuri* (“to be surprised”) is introduced in an optional reading section as part of a dialogue, with its meaning given in the back-of-book glossary, but the main text provides no an example sentence for *bikkuri*. None of the mimetics across either volume is accompanied by any explicit metalinguistic explanation. The textbooks do not point out that these terms are mimetic words, nor do they comment on how their sounds relate to their meanings. There are no footnotes or sidebars noting, for example, that *bikkuri* is an mimetic depiction of being startled. In short, Minna no Nihongo’s approach is to treat mimetics just like any other word, providing a translation and perhaps a brief example, with no special pedagogical handling, for the most part.

There are three noteworthy deviations from the previously explained pattern in which mimetics are taught. These are: the word *perapera* (“fluent”), Chapter 39, and Chapter 47. To begin with the word *perapera, which* Minna no Nihongo Shokyuu I introduces in a multimodal way. *Perapera* is not first given in a vocabulary list or translation; instead, it appears in a manga-style illustration in Chapter 19. In the comic panel, one character is shown speaking confidently in Japanese, with the katakana 「ペラペラ」 flowing from their mouth to indicate fluency, while another character struggles with a Japanese textbook. The scene implicitly conveys the meaning of *perapera* through imagery: the reader can infer that *perapera* means “speaking fluently.” However, the text still does not explicitly translate *perapera* on that page, so learners must guess its meaning from context. As for the second noteworthy deviation, there is Chapter 39. This chapter concerns itself with feelings and emotions. This chapter initially only introduces two mimetics; *gakkari* and *bikkuri.* On the next page, however, is a useful words section that introduces 4 more mimetics. All in a multimodal way, with a translation provided (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1: Chapter 39. Minna no Nihongo (ISBN978-4-88319-664-7)

Then, as the final noteworthy deviation, there is Chapter 47. In this chapter, the Useful Words & Information page is dedicated to mimetics (see Figure 2 below). This chapter provides the learner with 15 different mimetics, in a multimodal way, while providing not only a translation, but also an example of a potential Japanese verb that can accompany it. This is close to the vision by Watanabe (1997) discussed in earlier chapters. As there is no additional explanation, and no additional assignment, the analysis could not state that Minna no Nihongo provided any explicit explanation. That being said, however, it seems clear that in a classroom setting this chapter would provide a starting point for a teacher to explain and introduce the learners to mimetics and their peculiarities. For self-studying, however, this does not suffice, as it relies on the learner looking for explanations using other sources.

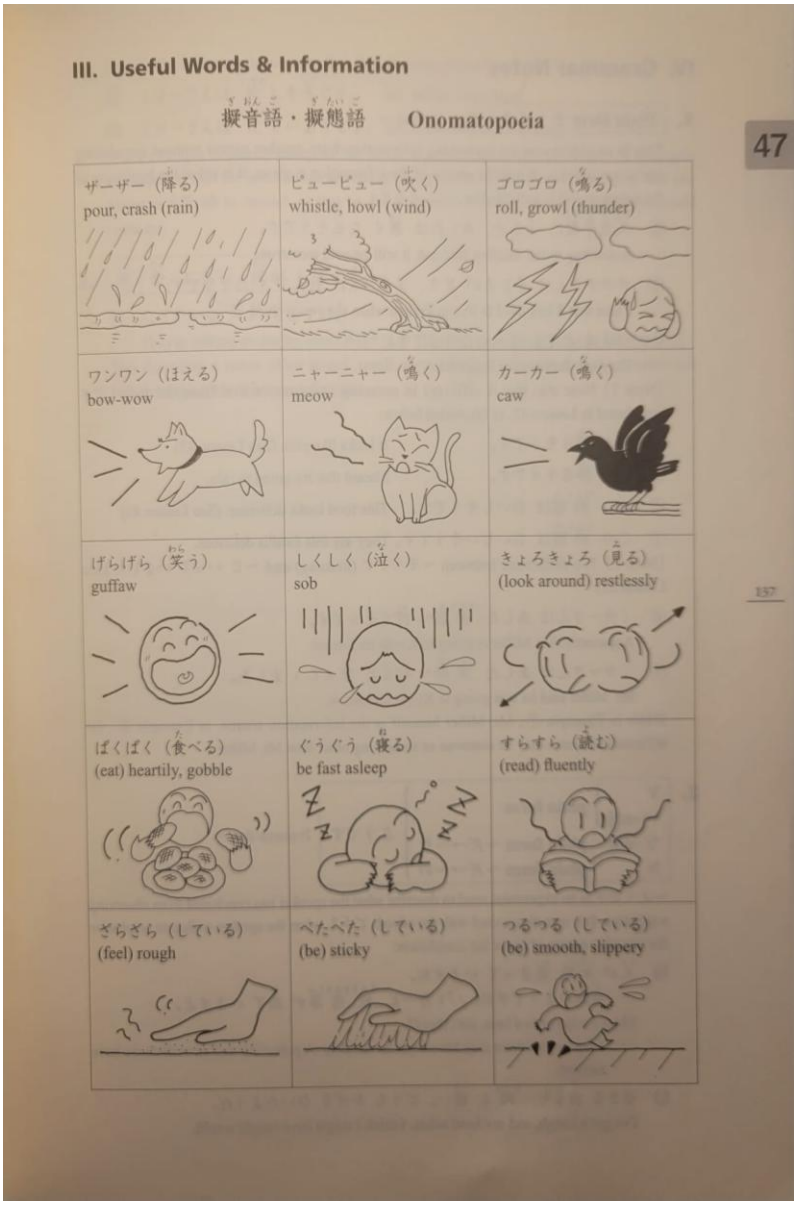

Figure 2: Chapter 47. Minna no Nihongo (ISBN978-4-88319-664-7)

In summary, the Minna no Nihongo series provides only a small number of mimetics across its two volumes, and when it does include them, they are usually handled like other, non-mimetic words. The only notable exceptions are the *perapera*-comic, Chapter 39, and Chapter 47. Learners encounter these words infrequently, only in the vocabulary list, the Useful Words & Information page, the odd example sentence, and the sound–symbolic aspect is never pointed out. The general trend is that mimetics in Minna no Nihongo are under-utilized. Minna no Nihongo, while proving to show improvement over the textbooks analysed by Watanabe (1997), still has room for improvement when it comes to mimetics. This will be discussed in a later chapter.

Genki

The Genki series (Volumes I and II) provides even less exposure to mimetic words than Minna no Nihongo. Across both textbooks, Genki introduces only nine mimetic expressions in total, while there were twenty-nine found in Minna no Nihongo. These few mimetics are scattered across various lessons as ordinary vocabulary, without any concentrated focus or special section devoted to sound-symbolic words. In other words, Genki's coverage of mimetic expressions is extremely limited and treated as an afterthought in the overall curriculum. All the mimetic words in Genki are presented just like regular vocabulary, with an English gloss and perhaps a brief example sentence or dialogue, but no further commentary. For instance, *yukkuri* is taught as the adverb "slowly", and *bikkuri* is introduced as an expression meaning "to be surprised". These words appear in context within dialogues or exercises, so learners see them used in a sentence, but the textbook offers no hint that they are mimetics.

Unlike Minna no Nihongo, Genki provides no dedicated sections or multimodal introductions for mimetics. There are no supplementary pages or "useful words" boxes highlighting groups of mimetics, nor any illustrations meant to convey their meaning. Genki's illustrations are used for general storytelling and dialogues, but none of the nine mimetic words are ever introduced through pictures or comic-style context. Notably though, is that Genki even introduces the Japanese term *giseigo*, which was translated as "onomatopoeia", which is a type mimetic. Despite teaching this term, it fails to capitalize on this as a teachable moment. The textbook includes *giseigo* as a vocabulary item when teaching Japanese characters, but offers no further explanation or exploration of Japanese mimetic words despite defining the concept. This comes across as a missed opportunity: Genki names one of the categories of mimetics, but does not provide any deeper insight. As mentioned in the Introduction, Indo-European languages do not have many sound-symbolic words, so perhaps the learners using this English-based Japanese textbook are completely unfamiliar with the term "onomatopoeia" in the first place.

In summary, the Genki series makes minimal use of mimetics and provides no instruction on them. Learners using Genki encounter only a handful of mimetic expressions, far fewer than in Minna no Nihongo, and those they do encounter are presented in isolation. There are no special notes, no visual aids, and no emphasis on the iconic significance of these words. Genki's approach thus treats mimetic words as just another set of vocabulary to memorize, offering little to raise learners' awareness of the sound-symbolism found in Japanese.

Discussion

This thesis set out to examine how Japanese mimetic words are presented in widely used beginner-level textbooks, driven by the key question: How are Japanese mimetics introduced and taught in popular Japanese language textbooks? As discussed earlier in the Background chapter, mimetics offer intuitive links between sound and meaning, and earlier research shows that these intuitive links can help learners with the acquisition of mimetic vocabulary. For example, learners have been found to memorize and recall mimetic words significantly better than non-mimetic words. Such findings (e.g. Lockwood et al., 2016; Nakata, 2017) underscore the potential of mimetics to serve as a natural "sound-symbolism boost" for learning these mimetics. On the other hand, Japanese textbooks seem to have underutilized this potential. Research dating back to Watanabe (1997) showed that popular textbooks largely overlooked mimetic vocabulary. Scholars have noted that mimetics were often deemed too nuanced or context-dependent for beginners, and it was even noted that learners themselves reported these words to be difficult and unintuitive (Hamano, 1986; Watanabe, 1997; Tsuchiya et al., 2012). This disconnect between the potential advantages of mimetics and their absence in teaching materials is the main topic this thesis addresses.

The analysis of Genki I & II and Minna no Nihongo Shokyuu I & II reveals that Japanese mimetics remain a rarity in mainstream textbooks, much as Watanabe (1997) saw decades ago. Across the four volumes, only 32 distinct mimetics were found. While the Minna no Nihongo series introduces more mimetics (29 mimetics) than Genki (9 mimetics), both series underutilize these expressions pedagogically. In Minna no Nihongo, mimetics appears sporadically and are usually treated like any other vocabulary item. Genki's coverage is even more limited. Its few mimetic words are scattered across lessons without any focused treatment. In short, neither textbook line fully integrates or emphasizes mimetic words in the core curriculum. This is disappointing given that, as discussed in the Background chapter earlier, Japanese mimetics are common, everyday words used by all ages. Ignoring such a common aspect of Japanese vocabulary suggests a gap between what learners learn using textbooks and what they might need in real life. This gap is remarkable at the beginner level, as it implies that learners complete their introduction to the Japanese language without exposure to mimetic words that could have provided an entire set of mimetic vocabulary in the early stages of their language journey, at greater ease than other words.

The way these textbooks handle mimetics shows a lack of pedagogical depth. All nine mimetics in Genki are presented with only a translation, and perhaps a brief example sentence, just like with most mimetics in Minna no Nihongo. Learners see them used in dialogues or exercises, but the materials give no hint that these are sound-symbolic words. There are no special notes or explanations to alert students to their mimetic nature. One might counter that this minimal approach is a deliberate form of implicit teaching. However, as discussed (see Nakata 2017), an experiment comparing explicit teaching to implicit exposure found that explicit instruction led to significantly better retention of mimetic vocabulary. This isn't to say implicit exposure has no effect, but rather that relying solely on implicit methods appears suboptimal given current research. In light of Nakata's findings, the analysed textbooks' implicit approach could even be considered outdated.

Minna no Nihongo at times provides a bit more context for some mimetics, in the form of illustrations for context, or example verbs that can accompany the mimetics. This, however, was not commonplace. Watanabe (1997) noted that textbooks could benefit from a more contextual approach. At least in the case of Minna no Nihongo, this somewhat came true. The aforementioned reliance on a teacher to explain mimetics while they are not taught in the textbook itself does not oppose Watanabe's (1997) views, as they proposed that teachers use gestures and sounds to convey mimetics, implying they were counting on teacher intervention anyway. Nakata's (2017) views are also not directly opposed by the inclusion of reliance on a teacher, as explicit instruction could still be provided by the teacher. The main difference, however, is that Nakata's view does not exclusively rely on a teacher, as explicit instruction could also be provided by means of writing.

Both Genki and Minna no Nihongo make use of many manga-style comic panels and drawings to depict dialogues, situations, and cultural notes. These visuals are clearly designed to enhance learner engagement and to provide contextual clues for language in use. However, with the exception of "*perapera*", Chapter 39 and Chapter 47 of Minna no Nihongo as described above, all illustrations omit mimetic expressions entirely. In authentic Japanese media (especially manga and anime), it is common to see mimetic sound effects and mimetic descriptors written into the scene. By contrast, the analysed textbooks have illustrations that generally contain no mimetic text at all. Even when a scene could naturally include a mimetic descriptor, the drawings do not include any mimetic sound effects or text. As mentioned, Watanabe (1997) and Nakata (2017) advocated for using illustrations to provide context for mimetics, so the idea is not foreign to pedagogy, but current textbooks only hint at this potential, using it too sparingly, or not at all.

The inclusion of *perapera* in a manga-style panel demonstrates the potential value of leveraging imagery to teach mimetic words. In that scene, learners can infer the meaning of *perapera* ("speaking fluently") through the combination of the mimetic text and the context described above. This kind of multimodal presentation plays to the strengths of mimetic words: their meanings are often intuitively guessable from context, especially when reinforced by visuals. If more of Minna no Nihongo's illustrations were accompanied with mimetics, students could be exposed to a wider range of mimetics. By seeing and hearing mimetics in context (even without formal study or translation of each one), L2 learners can gradually become sensitive to Japanese language intrinsic sound–meaning combinations. Over time, this familiarity can help acquisition when students eventually tackle mimetics more systematically, or when they start encountering them more on a daily basis.

In the analysed beginner-level textbooks exposure is scarce and often delayed until later chapters, learners are not given the opportunity to gradually develop sensitivity to Japanese sound–meaning combinations. This risks leaving them unprepared for real Japanese, where mimetics are frequent and carry important nuance. The delay in exposing students to mimetics until later chapters that was seen in the analysis seems to be counterproductive, as the previously mentioned study by Nakata (2017) suggests otherwise. They suggest that beginning students who were explicitly taught about the forms and sound-symbolic combinations of mimetics showed a similar level of improvement in mimetic vocabulary retention as more advanced students. These findings indicate that exposure to mimetics does not have to be delayed.

Across the four volumes, the mimetics came from varying types, namely *giongo (*mimicking sound), *giseigo* (mimicking vocal sounds), *gitaigo* (representing physical sensations/visual states), and *gijougo* (representing feelings or psychological states), but their distribution is clearly skewed toward non-mimicking forms: of the 34 mimetics identified, 17 are *gitaigo* and 8 *gijougo*, while only 6 *giseigo* and 3 *giongo* appear. This suggests textbook authors prioritize mimetics that are not heard in the world around us, but emerges from sensations or feelings. A per-item classification can be found in the last chapter of this thesis.

Some mimetics were present in both Genki and Minna no Nihongo, namely *bikkuri*, *gakkari*, *gorogoro*, *perapera*, *sorosoro*, *yukkuri*. *Perapera* is introduced multimodally in Minna no Nihongo, as explained earlier, while Genki introduces it, like all mimetics, as a regular word without any special attention. *gakkari/bikkuri* receive contextual illustrations in Minna no Nihongo Chapter 39, and *gorogoro* appears on a dedicated "useful words" page in Chapter 47, while Genki introduces these words, once again, as regular vocabulary. For *sorosoro* and *yukkuri*, both series present them as regular words, but it should be noted that in Minna no Nihongo, *sorosoro* is confined to the set phrase *sorosoro shitsurei-shimasu,* and it does not appear on its own at all.

As mentioned earlier, mimetics are not uniformly transparent: some rely on language universal sound–meaning combinations that are readily accessible to learners, while others draw on language intrinsic conventions that require exposure and practice (Saji et al., 2019; Dingemanse et al., 2016). Textbooks could highlight those cases where sound-symbolism provides an intuitive cue, while at the same time guiding learners to notice patterns that need to be acquired through instruction. The current materials, however, do neither. Even where Minna no Nihongo offers images or grouped examples, the sound-symbolic nature of these words is never explicitly addressed, and learners are not helped in developing their sensitivity to Japanese sound-symbolism. Additionally, this lack of sensitivity might stunt learners aiming to advance to higher levels of Japanese, as they are unprepared to deal with the conversational quirks of mimetics, which may reinforce the perception that they are particularly difficult to learn, as other scholars have said (Hamano, 1986; Tsuchiya et al., 2012). This does not have to be the case, as an early introduction to mimetics could prevent stunting, which is why this thesis looked at beginner-level textbooks.

This analysis points to a missed pedagogical opportunity. As Watanabe (1997) and Nakata (2017) suggested, mimetics benefit from contextual and multisensory presentation. The limited examples in Minna no Nihongo already indicate how this can be achieved, but future textbooks could apply such methods more consistently. In addition, short explanatory notes would suffice to raise awareness that Japanese has a large class of mimetic words, many of which follow recognizable patterns. These short explanatory notes could build the learner's knowledge over time, potentially providing the same benefits as seen in the aforementioned Nakata (2017) study, where explicit instruction on mimetics significantly aided retention and understanding of mimetic vocabulary. Incremental exposure from the early chapters onwards would then allow learners to normalize these forms and gradually attune to them even more.

In conclusion, the findings confirm that current textbooks still do not make full use of mimetics as a pedagogical resource, even when their pedagogical potential has been explored further. Both Genki and Minna no Nihongo provide learners with too few examples, and where mimetics are included, their iconicity is left ignored. A more integration of mimetics through explicit explanation, and regular exposure would better align textbooks with the potential benefits of sound-symbolism in more easily acquiring mimetic vocabulary.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to examine how Japanese mimetics are introduced and taught in widely used beginner textbooks, specifically the Genki and Minna no Nihongo series. The analysis confirms that these words remain largely underemphasized in both. In direct answer to the main research question, Japanese mimetics are introduced only sparingly and are mostly treated like any other vocabulary item. Learners encounter them infrequently and often in isolation: when these expressions do appear, they are usually presented without contextual support or explicit instruction. Thus, both Genki and Minna no Nihongo treat mimetic words as extras rather than as a core aspect of the language that could, due to their iconic nature, be learned with greater ease than other vocabulary. At the early stages of learning, such intuitive words could help broaden the learner's vocabulary and develop the learner's sensitivity to Japanese intrinsic sound-symbolic combinations, which students have been said to struggle with.

In Genki's two volumes, only 9 mimetic words appear, whereas Minna no Nihongo presents 29 different mimetics. Yet despite this difference, neither series integrates mimetics into the core curriculum in a systematic way. Minna no Nihongo's more frequent use of mimetics, occasionally reinforced by illustrations or other cues, shows that it is possible to present these words in context, but such instances are rare and mostly confined to later chapters. Genki's coverage is extremely limited. In both textbooks, the mimetic expressions that do appear tend to be scattered. Earlier research by Watanabe (1997) and Nakata (2017) recommended approaches to teaching mimetics that included multimodal methods, and explicit instruction, as there was a perceived benefit to these methods. This thesis found that while multimodal methods were present in one of the textbooks, they are not present often enough and early enough to help learners develop their sense for mimetics. Explicit instruction on mimetics was found in neither textbook.

These findings show a disconnect between research and Japanese beginner-level textbooks. The literature review highlighted that mimetic words are not only abundant in Japanese, but can serve as a set of vocabulary that can be learned with relatively greater ease, even for beginners. Experimental studies have shown that explicit instruction on mimetics can significantly improve learners' retention and understanding. However, current textbooks have yet to translate such insights into practice. The prevailing theory still relies on simple memorization and treating words all the same. Essentially a "*kotsukotsu*" (plodding) approach, without tapping into the more intuitive "*kirakira*" (sparkling) advantages of mimetic vocabulary. In practical terms, learners are putting in more effort to learn and memorize words, while there exists a set of words that could be learned more easily through inherent sound–meaning cues.

Closing the gap between theory and practice would not require a drastic overhaul, just some targeted adjustments. As discussed in the previous chapter, textbook designers could introduce mimetic words more systematically from the beginning, with brief notes or imagery to highlight their sound–meaning links. Inclusion of these notes would reduce the need for a teacher, empowering self-studying individuals. Gradual, repeated exposure to mimetics, integrated alongside other vocabulary, would help students become sensitive to these expressions over time and normalize their use. All analysed textbooks had many illustrations depicting situations already, of which many would be instantly compatible with adding mimetic expressions. Both textbooks were filled with cultural notes, where replacing a few of the early cultural notes with explicit teaching of mimetics would help the learner become aware of mimetics. A combination of these two changes could perfectly play off of each other. Such changes would align teaching materials with the natural strengths of mimetics. In the end, incorporating mimetics more deliberately into beginner-level textbooks would provide learners with an overlooked tool, helping them overcome a potential later hurdle, and enriching their language acquisition by bringing textbooks closer to the linguistic reality of Japanese.

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Gathered data from analysis

Mimetic	Book	Chapter	Translation only	Example provided	Contextually introduced	Explicitly explained	NOTES	Mimetic type
betabeta	MNN2	47	YES	YES	YES	NO	Not taught as part of the official vocabulary. This word was taught as part of the "helpful words" section of the chapter. The word is introduced with an illustration, an example of a Japanese verb that can accompany it, and a translation.	Gitaigo
bikkuri	MNN1	22	Yes	Yes	NO	NO	Introduced as extra vocab in one of the extra books focussing on reading small texts.	Gijougo
bikkuri	MNN2	39	YES	YES	YES	NO	Taught as part of the regular vocabulary. Shows up in exercises for the chapter. In the grammar book, on the page following the vocabulary list, this word was used next to an illustration depicting the meaning in context.	Gijougo
bikkuri	Genki1	10	YES	YES	NO	NO	Taught twice. Once during Chapter 10, once during chapter 21. Both times without explanation or illustration.	Gijougo
dokidoki	MNN2	39	YES	YES	YES	NO	Not taught as part of the official vocabulary, but as part of the "helpful words" section of the chapter. The word is introduced with an illustration depicting its meaning, along with the translation. The word was introduced only as a verb taking -suru	Gijougo
gakkari	MNN2	39	YES	YES	YES	NO	Taught as part of the regular vocabulary. Shows up in exercises for the chapter. In the grammar book, on the page following the vocabulary list, this word was used next to an illustration depicting the meaning in context.	Gijougo
gakkari	Genki2	20	YES	YES	NO	NO	Taught twice. Once during Chapter 20, once during chapter 23. Both times without explanation or illustration.	Gijougo
geragera	MNN2	47	YES	YES	YES	NO	Not taught as part of the official vocabulary. This word was taught as part of the "helpful words" section of the chapter. The word is introduced with an illustration, an example of a Japanese verb that can accompany it, and a translation.	Giseigo
gikkuri	MNN1	17	Yes	NO	NO	NO	Part of the set word "gikkuri goshi". No practice, no repetition. It is an extra word introduced in a context-driven page. Not part of official vocab of this chapter.	Gijougo
gorogoro	MNN2	47	YES	YES	YES	NO	Not taught as part of the official vocabulary. This word was taught as part of the "helpful words" section of the chapter. The word is introduced with an illustration, an example of a Japanese verb that can accompany it, and a translation.	Gitaigo
gorogoro	Genki1	10	YES	YES	NO	NO	Taught as regular vocab. No example images to help explain the mimetic.	Gitaigo
guuguu	MNN2	47	YES	YES	YES	NO	Not taught as part of the official vocabulary. This word was taught as part of the "helpful words" section of the chapter. The word is introduced with an illustration, an example of a Japanese verb that can accompany it, and a translation.	Giseigo

hakkiri	MNN2	27	YES	YES	NO	NO	Taught as regular vocabulary. Was used in an exercise twice. No further information provided.	Gitaigo
harahara	MNN2	39	YES	YES	YES	NO	Not taught as part of the official vocabulary, but as part of the "helpful words" section of the chapter. The word is introduced with an illustration depicting its meaning, along with the translation. The word was introduced only as a verb taking -suru	Gijougo
jirojiro	Genki1	8	YES	YES	NO	NO	Word taught as part of the vocabulairy, as part of the compound "jirojiro miru".	Gitaigo
kaakaa	MNN2	47	YES	YES	YES	NO	Not taught as part of the official vocabulary. This word was taught as part of the "helpful words" section of the chapter. The word is introduced with an illustration, an example of a Japanese verb that can accompany it, and a translation.	Giseigo
kichinto	MNN2	38	YES	YES	NO	NO	Taught as regular vocabulary. Was used in an exercise once. No further information provided.	Gitaigo
kyorokyoro	MNN2	47	YES	YES	YES	NO	Not taught as part of the official vocabulary. This word was taught as part of the "helpful words" section of the chapter. The word is introduced with an illustration, an example of a Japanese verb that can accompany it, and a translation.	Gitaigo
nikoniko	Genki2	20	YES	YES	NO	NO	Taught as regular vocab. No example images to help explain the mimetic.	Gitaigo
niyaniya	Genki2	13	YES	YES	NO	NO	Taught as regular vocab. No example images to help explain the mimetic.	Gitaigo
nyaanyaa	MNN2	47	YES	YES	YES	NO	Not taught as part of the official vocabulary. This word was taught as part of the "helpful words" section of the chapter. The word is introduced with an illustration, an example of a Japanese verb that can accompany it, and a translation.	Giseigo
pakupaku	MNN2	47	YES	YES	YES	NO	Not taught as part of the official vocabulary. This word was taught as part of the "helpful words" section of the chapter. The word is introduced with an illustration, an example of a Japanese verb that can accompany it, and a translation.	Gitaigo
perapera	MNN1	19	NO	NO	Yes	NO	Shown in illustration of someone talking fast/fluently, while another character is struggling to keep up while reading a textbook. The image illustrates that the one struggling becomes 'jyouzu', with perapera flowing from his mouth	Gitaigo
perapera	Genki2	22	YES	YES	NO	NO	Taught as regular vocab. No example images to help explain the mimetic.	Gitaigo
pyuupyuu	MNN2	47	YES	YES	YES	NO	Not taught as part of the official vocabulary. This word was taught as part of the "helpful words" section of the chapter. The word is introduced with an illustration, an example of a Japanese verb that can accompany it, and a translation.	Giongo
shikushiku	MNN2	47	YES	YES	YES	NO	Not taught as part of the official vocabulary. This word was taught as part of the "helpful words" section of the chapter. The word is introduced with an illustration, an example of a Japanese verb that can accompany it, and a translation.	Giseigo

sorosoro	MNN1	8	Yes	Yes	NO	NO	Only taught as part of set expression "sorosoro shitsureishimasu". No attention or explanation further. This set expression comes back in the exercise, but adds nothing.	Gitaigo
sorosoro	Genki2	23	YES	YES	NO	NO	Taught as regular vocab. No example images to help explain the mimetic.	Gitaigo
surasura	MNN2	47	YES	YES	YES	NO	Not taught as part of the official vocabulary. This word was taught as part of the "helpful words" section of the chapter. The word is introduced with an illustration, an example of a Japanese verb that can accompany it, and a translation.	Gitaigo
tsurutsuru	MNN2	47	YES	YES	YES	NO	Not taught as part of the official vocabulary. This word was taught as part of the "helpful words" section of the chapter. The word is introduced with an illustration, an example of a Japanese verb that can accompany it, and a translation.	Gitaigo
uttori	MNN2	39	YES	YES	YES	NO	Not taught as part of the official vocabulary, but as part of the "helpful words" section of the chapter. The word is introduced with an illustration depicting its meaning, along with the translation. The word was introduced only as a verb taking -suru	Gijougo
wakuwaku	MNN2	39	YES	YES	YES	NO	Not taught as part of the official vocabulary, but as part of the "helpful words" section of the chapter. The word is introduced with an illustration depicting its meaning, along with the translation. The word was introduced only as a verb taking -suru	Gijougo
wanwan	MNN2	47	YES	YES	YES	NO	Not taught as part of the official vocabulary. This word was taught as part of the "helpful words" section of the chapter. The word is introduced with an illustration, an example of a Japanese verb that can accompany it, and a translation.	Giseigo
yukkuri	MNN1	14	Yes	Yes	NO	NO	Taught as regular vocabulary. In an exercise, it was used next to 'takusan', indicating its use as an adverb. All other uses were ignored. No explanation further. It also shows up twice in mondaishuu. Adverb. No expl	Gitaigo
yukkuri	Genki1	6	YES	YES	NO	NO	Taught as regular vocab. No example images to help explain the mimetic.	Gitaigo
zaazaa	MNN2	47	YES	YES	YES	NO	Not taught as part of the official vocabulary. This word was taught as part of the "helpful words" section of the chapter. The word is introduced with an illustration, an example of a Japanese verb that can accompany it, and a translation.	Giongo
zarazara	MNN2	47	YES	YES	YES	NO	Not taught as part of the official vocabulary. This word was taught as part of the "helpful words" section of the chapter. The word is introduced with an illustration, an example of a Japanese verb that can accompany it, and a translation.	Gitaigo
zazazaa	MNN2	27	NO	NO	YES	NO	An exercise asked the learner to write that they can hear the water in Japanese. The exercise had a comic next to it displaying zazazaa to simulate water. No definitions were given, but from context it could be known.	Giongo