Semi-lexical nouns in Japanese: A case study of mimetic compounds

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1. Introduction
Japanese mimetics frequently occur with the quotative marker -to in order to modify verbs and adjectives, which is considered to be their primary function (Hamano (1998)). For instance:

(1) Iwa-ga garagara-to kazureta. (Kageyama (2007: 31))
rock-NOM MIM-QUOT collapse.PAST
‘The rocks rattlingly collapsed.’

In (1), the mimetic garagara ‘rattle,’ accompanied by -to, modifies the verb, describing the sound created by the collapse of rocks. However, there are cases where mimetics seem to lack this primary function. Among the cases where mimetics seem to behave atypically are compounds containing mimetics as right-hand constituents, which, to our knowledge, have not been dealt with in previous studies. Here, we would like to call them “mimetic compounds.” In (2), for example, the compounds contain the mimetics don ‘thud’ and banban ‘bang’ as right-hand constituents, respectively.

(2) a. kabe-don wall-MIM ‘the act of a man cornering a woman by placing his arm(s) against a wall with a thud.’

b. neko-banban cat-MIM ‘the act of banging the hood of a car before starting the car in order not to injure a cat hiding under the hood in a cold season.’

Given the right-hand head rule, the heads of these compounds are supposed to be mimetics. This means that mimetics determine the categorial properties of the compounds as a whole; that is, mimetic compounds are also mimetics. So they should behave in the same way as mimetics like (1). However, the examples in (3) show that unlike garagara in (1), kabe-don and neko-banban cannot co-occur with the quotative marker -to, and hence lacks the ability to modify verbs (and adjectives).

(3) a. * Taro-wa Hanako-o kabe-don-to osita.
Taro-TOP Hanako-ACC wall-MIM-QUOT push.PAST
lit. ‘Taro pushed Hanako against the wall with a thud.’

b. * Taro-wa kuruma-o neko-banban-to tataita.
Taro-TOP car-ACC cat-MIM-QUOT tap.PAST
lit. ‘Taro banged the car in order not to injure cats which may hide under the hood.’

This fact raises the question of why mimetic compounds do not behave as mimetics like (1), even though they seem to be headed by mimetics. This presentation aims to answer this question.

2. Proposal
To answer the question, we propose that mimetic compounds actually have silent nouns as heads. Silent nouns, whose existence is argued for by Kayne (2005) and Corver (2008), are phonetically null variants of semantically light nouns such as person, thing, place, etc. Emonds (2000) calls such nouns “semi-lexical nouns.” We assume that mimetic compounds like kabe-don and neko-banban contain the silent counterpart of action as heads, as shown in (4) (The silent noun is represented by capital letters).

(4) a. [ kabe [ don ACTION ] ]
b. [ neko [ banban ACTION ] ]

Given this proposal, we can answer the above question as follows. Mimetics are a lexical category which can be directly followed by the quotative marker -to (see (1)). However, in (4), the semi-lexical noun ACTION is an actual head of mimetic compounds. This means that their categorial status is not a mimetic but a noun. Therefore, kabe-don and neko-banban are incompatible with -to and cannot modify verbs.

The proposal is supported by the following evidence. First, mimetic compounds and nouns show the same distributional pattern. For instance, kabe-don in (5) is accompanied by the case particles -o and -ga.
This distributional fact suggests that mimetic compounds are nominal. Second, as the interpretations in (2) show, kabe-don and neko-banban do not describe sounds themselves but refer to the specific acts. This can be confirmed by the following test:

(6)  
Kabe-don-wa [don / #oto / kooi] no issyu da.  
wall-MIM-TOP [MIM / sound / action] of a kind COP  
‘Kabe-don is a kind of {don / sound / action}.’

According to Namiki (2001: 279), the head of a compound is the constituent that has a “kind of” relation between the compound as a whole and itself. The unacceptability of don and oto ‘sound’ in (6), which are the apparent rightmost element in the compound and a hypernym of don respectively, shows that don at the right-hand position is not the head of kabe-don. On the other hand, kooi is acceptable in (6), indicating the existence of ACTION as a head. The third evidence comes from Corver (2008), which argues that the existence of silent nominals is confirmed by their exchangeability for their overt counterparts. The exchangeability can be observed in mimetic compounds; ACTION in (4) can be replaced with kooi ‘action,’ overt counterpart of ACTION, as in [kabe [don kooi]] and [neko [banban kooi]]. These data lead us to conclude that mimetic compounds are headed by semi-lexical nouns like ACTION.

Then, why do semi-lexical nouns occur in mimetic compounds? We argue that there are (at least) two reasons for this. The first reason is related to the original function of mimetics. The mimetics used in (2) merely express sounds in the natural world; they cannot express anything other than sounds. Therefore, the “action interpretation” of the relevant mimetic compounds should be guaranteed by certain elements other than mimetics, namely, semi-lexical nouns such as ACTION. Secondly, semi-lexical nouns serve to semantically mediate between the mimetic and non-mimetic constituents. The constituents of a mimetic compound are not directly related to each other. In kabe-don, for example, the mimetic don merely expresses sound and hence semantically has no direct relation with kabe (see also Kita (1997) for related discussion). It is the semi-lexical noun ACTION that makes the compound complete as a conceptual bundle: the action of placing arms against a wall makes the sound “don.” Thus, the semi-lexical noun ACTION serves as a mediator, integrating the constituents into a compound.

3. Implication  
If a semi-lexical noun is required to mediate between a mimetic and non-mimetic, every word with mimetics should have a semi-lexical noun. Tamori and Schourup (1999: 63) point out the existence of expressions like doka-yuki (MIM-snow ‘the heavy fall of snow’). Although the apparent right-hand constituent is yuki ‘snow,’ it is not a semantic determinant; rather, the compound refers to a kind of state, as shown in (7).

(7)  
Doka-yuki-wa [#yuki / zyootai] no issyu da.  
MIM-snow-TOP [snow / state] of a kind COP  
‘Doka-yuki is a kind of {snow / state}.’

This fact suggests that the compound has the silent noun STATE as a head, as in [doka [yuki STATE]]. The existence of state can be confirmed by its exchangeability for the overt counterpart zyootai ‘state,’ as in [doka [yuki zyootai]]. We can conclude that a semi-lexical noun also exists in compounds like doka-yuki.

Selected References:  