

## JAPANESE PSEUDO-ONOMATOPES OF CHINESE ORIGIN

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**Abstract:** Though currently part of the lexicon in Japanese, *pseudo-  
onomatopes* are those words of Chinese origin, which compose a major  
part of mimetic expressions. There are several conditions for the category  
of pseudo-*onomatopes* to be recognized by the native speakers as though  
they were of Japanese origin. By investigating the status of those lexical  
items, the interface between orthography and phonology will be highlight-  
ed from a new angle.

**Keywords:** pseudo-*onomatopes*, kana-pseudo-*onomatopoeia*, orthography,  
phonology, interface, hybrid

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The category of 'pseudo-*onomatopoeia*' in Japanese was suggested in Mito and Kakehi (1980) and Kakehi (1986), then provided some definition, data and discussion in a certain detail in Kadooka (1993). It is the *onomatopoeia* lexicon in Japanese borrowed from Chinese.

Though those lexical entries of Chinese origin should be written with *hanzi*, the Chinese characters or referred to as *kanji* in Japanese, more and more *onomatopoeia* words are perceived by the native speakers of Japanese as if they were of native origin. This is reflected in the manner of substituting *kanji* with *kana*, the nativized orthography derived from *kanji*. Many of the entries belong to the category of *onomatopoeia*: i.e. *pseudo-*onomatopes**.

This paper is to go a step further by exemplifying the entries of *pseudo-*onomatopes** from the perspectives of phonology - orthography interface; that is, those entries in which *kanji* substituted by *kana* either partially or thoroughly. I shall refer to such

items as kana-pseudo-onomatopoeia. the likeliness of being substituted with kana differs from one entry to another. After listing the data and discussing the analysis, conditions to affect the tendency will be subject of one of the concluding remarks.

## 2. JAPANESE ORTHOGRAPHY

The Japanese orthography is a mixture of some typographies. This language of unknown philogenetic origin did not have its own alphabets. The first character introduced was hanzi from Mainland China, by way of Korean Peninsula, and referred to as *kanji* according to the Japanese way of pronouncing Chinese characters. During the following some centuries, *kanji* was used both as phonotypes and as ideograms. Then the two types of *kana*, hira-kana and kata-kana were invented by deforming the shapes of *kanji*.

There can be distinguished two ways of use of *kanji* in Japanese: the borrowing of the Chinese lexicon themselves (loan-words), and the Japanese way of reading *kanji*. As a consequence, there are two ways of pronunciation per one character in general: *on-yomi* for the Chinese loan-words and *kun-yomi* for the native Japanese lexicon. Some of *kanji*, however, lack *on-yomi* reading (e.g. *saku* (strategy)); and some have been coined in Japan (*kokujit*, literally 'national character': e.g. *hatake* (field)).

Through the use of *kanji* and two types of *kana* letters, the distribution of each has been established; *kanji* expresses the essential contents of nouns, verbs, adjectives, while hira-kana type is assigned subsidiary categories such as particles and auxiliaries. Kata-kana is mainly for transcribing foreign loan-words of Western origin for recent fifty years.

As a matter of fact, however, it is observed recently that more and more words of Chinese origin are written with *kana*, not with the canonical *kanji*. There will be several possible reasons for this tendency; first, *kanji* in these entries are difficult to write; second, word processors are becoming more prevalent in the last decade or so, so ordinary Japanese people can read but can not copy them; third, the number of *kanji* in daily use is recommended to be restricted to 1850 by the government, within which a considerable proportion of the pseudo-onomatopes should be written in *kana*.

As the lexical categories which should be written with *kanji* but substituted with *kana* instead, here we would like to take nouns for examples. It is observed that the concrete nouns are more likely to be written with *kana* than the abstract ideological concepts, such as the following:

small creatures:	<i>ari</i> (ant), <i>kumo</i> (spider), <i>inu</i> (dog)
plants:	<i>sakura</i> (cherry), <i>kasi</i> (oak)
cuisine:	<i>chaahan</i> (fried rice, the Chinese form is <i>chaofan</i> ), <i>toohu</i> (soy bean curd, Chinese form <i>tofu</i> )

This is mainly because the *kanji* assigned for the material is *kun-yomi* as for the small creatures and plants, and these words are commonly used during the daily life. The abstract concepts such as *communism* (*kyoosan-syugi*) and *philosophy* (*tetugaku*), on the other hand, are directly borrowed from Chinese (or coined in Japan after the Chinese way), both the terms and the ideas, and there is no counterpart to substitute with *Yamato-kotoba*.

The more essential reason for the pseudo-onomatopoeia lexicon substituted with kana is that these words sound like Japanese native lexicon in terms of the word formation and rhythmic characteristics so that they are not necessarily written with kanji. The data of such entries will be presented in the next section, and these possible reasons will be disputed in the following sections.

### 3. CATEGORY AND DATA OF PSEUDO-ONOMATOPOEIA

Below are those entries of pseudo-onomatopoeia written in two or four kanji; here we will exclusively look at the idioms consisting of two and four letters, because those of one/three character(s) are highly literal and not canonical as pseudo-onomatopoeia in terms of the numbers of morae (see (Kadooka, 1993) for this point). The current Japanese pronunciations are indicated between slashes as phonological and/or orthographical transcriptions, not phonetic. The following are notational remarks: the *orthographical diphthongs* /ei ou/ represent the long monophthongs [e: o:]; long vowels are shown with the sequence of the identical vowel symbols; a full stop is inserted between the boundary of syllables within a morpheme when preceded by a moraic nasal /N/ and followed by a vowel or the syllable-initial /n/; a moraic consonant /Q/ is indicated by the identical consonant of the onset of the next syllable.

two letters

reduplication

/kon-kon/:	to persuade someone earnestly/the manner of water springing out fluently/ the manner of sleeping deeply
/sen-sen/:	the flow of a creek/a fluttering; a glittering
/san-san/:	the manner of (the sun) shining brightly
/kou-kou/:	the manner of lights shining brightly; brilliant
/tou-tou/:	the manner of the water flowing fluently; speaking a lot
/utu-utu/:	melancholic
/mon-mon/:	the manner of worrying about something
/ru-ru/:	to talk endlessly
/tyaki-tyaki/:	trueborn; genuine; pure (originally it denoted Tokyoite)

rhyme

/mou-rou/:	dim; indistinct; hazy; dizzy
/aku-seku/:	busily; earnestly
/kaku-syaku/:	hale and hearty
/hatu-ratu/:	(of a person) lively; vivid; vigorous

alliteration

/hou-hutu/:	vividly; lively
/tyuu-tyo/:	hesitation
/sas-sou/:	smartly; with light steps

four letters

AABB

2+2 morae

/zeze-hihi/: free and unbiased; judging case by case

2+4

/ii-dakudaku/: being obedient to what has been told

/ruru-menmen/: to talk endlessly

/kiki-kaikai/: strange

/sisi-sonson/: generation by generation

/kyokyo-zituzitu/: true or false

/tutu-uraura/: everywhere within the nation

/syasya-rakuraku/: not adherent: not greedy

4+2

/sansan-gogo/: in twos and threes

/syousyou-seze/: eternally

4+4

/kankan-gakugaku/: the manner of discussing something loudly

/kenken-gougou/: be noisy, chatting loudly

/yuuyuu-kankan/: easy-going; happy-go-lucky

/heihei-bonbon/: ordinary; common

/sensen-kyoukyou/: timid

/meimei-hakuhaku/: clear; obvious

/kuukuu-zyakuzyaku/: empty

/nen.nen-saisai/: annually

/tyoutyou-nan.nan/: harmonious whispering (of a man and a woman)

/seisei-doudou/: fair and square

noun/adjective + reduplication

2+4

/sisi-ruirui/: abundance of corpses

/iki-youyou/: vigorous and proudly

/kosi-tantan/: watchful at the target

/kiko-doudou/: braveness of army

/waki-aiai/: harmonious; friendly

/tasi-seisei/: a galaxy of intellect

/uto-sousou/: the manner of time passing so rapid

3+4

/zento-youyou/: hopeful in the future

/kikoku-syuusyuu/: terrible

/yoin-zyouzyou/: the manner of afterglow lasting for long

/yooyuu-syakusyaku/:	calm and composed
/kyoumi-sinsin/:	be deeply interested
/kisoku-en.en/:	gasp for breath; puff and blow; be dying
/ihuu-doudou/:	dignified; imposing; grand; stately
/onto-rourou/:	in a clear, resonant voice

## 4+4

/zinsin-kyoukyou/:	the manner of people being threatened
/kouhyou-sakusaku/:	favorably commented
/gankou-keikei/:	keen gaze
/syosetu-hunpun/:	various views
/syousin-yokuyoku/:	timid

## manner/sound + modified

/kaka-taisyou/:	laughing loudly
/ryuuryuu-sinku/:	steady effort
/kenken-hukuyou/:	to be observant to what one is taught
/kenken-hikyuu/:	to be obedient
/en.en-tyouda/:	a long line
/totutotu-kaiji/:	a strange happening; an extremely inconvenient happening
/seisei-ruten/:	a state of flux
/yuuyuu-ziteki/:	a free/easy life

## noun/adjective + rhyme or alliteration

/hatimen-reirou/:	to be everyone's friend
/muti-moumai/:	ignorant
/aimai-moko/:	vague
/suiten-houhutu/:	the manner in which the sky and the sea are mixed together
/siri-meturetu/:	incoherent
/timi-mouryou/:	monsters
/sin.in-hyoubyou/:	the excellence of fine arts
/syuuuhuu-sakubaku/:	lonesome (as in early autumn)
/suiho-mansan/:	to stagger drunkened
/kogi-syunzyun/:	being suspicious and in hesitation

Before the discussion of the general characteristics as the category of pseudo-onomatopoeia, let us see the individual item of importance.

Among these, the only entry of kun-yomi reading is /tutu-uraura/ (on-yomi of /tu/ (port) is /sin/ and /ura/ (inlet of the sea or the lake) /ho/); if the definition of the pseudo-onomatopoeia was strictly applied, therefore, it would be excluded from the list. But neither /tu/ nor /ura/ is a common noun of ordinary usage; in that sense /tutu-uraura/ is similar to other entries of on-yomi reading. By reduplicating each morpheme, the meaning of 'every' is rendered in this entry and regarded as pseudo-onomatope.

Another characteristic entry is /tyaki-tyaki/ in which the original kanji pronunciation is /tyaku-tyaku/. The palatalization of the second and fourth syllables in this item

makes the speakers consider it as native, since there is no reading of with this reading of on-yomi for any kanji. Typically this adjective modifies the mentality of a genuine Tokyoite as in 'tyaki-tyaki-no Edokko (a true-born Tokyoite)', but it seems deviant if it designates a non-Tokyoite ('tyaki-tyaki-no Niniwakko' (a true-born Osakan)).

One of the landmarks to distinguish pseudo-onomatopoeia from the genuine ones is the phenomenon of sequential voicing (*rendaku*). It is not applicable for the native onomatopoeia but it is for those entries of Chinese origin (notice that it is valid for the native lexicon of non-onomatope: *hito-bito* (person, plural) vs. *hito* (person)). Among the items in the above list, /syousyou-seze/ and /syosetu-hunpun/ are the instances of sequential voicing; the independent morpheme /se/ (generation) is realized as /ze/ as the consequence of the voicing of /s/ to /z/ in the former; so is /hun/ (various) to /pun/ for the latter (see Chapter 10 of Vance (1987) for this phenomenon). But it is not the case in /sisi-sonson/; if rendaku is applied, it would be \*/sisi-sonzon/ or \*/sizi-sonson/ nor the doubly-voiced \*/sizi-sonzon/. The reason is not clear why it is applied in some items while not in others.

Notice that all of the noun + reduplication are of the combination of the subject and the complement: e.g. /zinsin/ 'public feeling' are /kyoukyou/ 'afraid of; threatened.' The only exception is /syousin-yokuyoku/; both of /syousin/ and /yokuyoku/ are adjective meaning 'timid.'

To the contrary to the above manner of the formation, when the reduplicated morpheme precedes the non-duplicatives, the whole word is the compound of the modifier and the modified. In /kaka/ 'the sound of laughing' and /taisyou/ 'to laugh loudly,' an adverb precedes the predicate.

In the entries such as /heihei-bonbon/, /meimei-haku-haku/, /kiki-kaikai/, there exist the non-duplicated counterparts: /heibon/ (ordinary, common), /meihaku/ (clear, obvious), /kikai/ (strange). These four-kanji versions are the emphases of the two-kanji adjective. In these pairs, it is obvious that the reduplication forms are derived from the two-kanji counterparts.

The four-kanji /zeze-hihi/ and the two /zehi/ are different in meaning, contrary to the derivations mentioned above; the latter indicates the noun 'right (ze) and/or wrong (hi)' or adverb 'definitely.' In this particular case the duplication renders the suggestion that 'each case should be judged as right or wrong, not depending on individual ideology' as in 'zeze-hihi de nozomu.'

Another entry in which the four-kanji duplication is not the emphasis of the two-letter counterpart: /sisi-sonson/ (generation by generation) and /sison/ (descendant). The morpheme /si/ represents 'child' and /son/ 'grandchild.' With this entry, the reduplication renders the effect of denoting the meaning of 'each.'

The other entries do not have the two-letter counterparts, which implies that the four-kanji entries are canonical for these items.

Some of the words are so highly nativized that most of the speakers of Japanese are not conscious about the etymology; /aku-seku/ (busily and/or earnestly), for instance, is altogether four-syllable and rhymed in every two syllables, which suits one of the most prevalent native onomatopoeia lexical pattern. The ordinary Japanese speakers would not know that it is written with the kanji, though they unconsciously utter as in 'mainiti aku-seku-to

hataraku' (work busily every day). /aku-seku/ is the most suitable example of kana-pseudo-onomatopoeia in that it is almost completely perceived as native words by the speakers of Japanese.

In the case of /kaku-syaku/ 'hale and hearty' as in 'ano hito wa kyuu-jis-sai daga kaku-syaku to site-iru' (he is still hale and hearty though he is ninety) we have some consciousness of its Chinese origin, but cannot write in kanji as it is so difficult. In addition, each of /kaku/ or /syaku/ is not used for other words. Compared with /aku-seku/, the latter is less nativized from the orthographical perspective.

There is one native onomatopoeia item whose phonological structure is exactly the same as /aku-seku/ and /kaku-syaku/: /giku-syaku/ (unsmoothness of the human relationship) as in 'katyoo to watasi wa giku-syaku-site-iru' (my boss and I are not in good relation). All of the three entries consist of four syllables and are rhymed in every two syllables. It is evident from this resemblance that the genuine and pseudo-onomatopes share some common features with regard to phonology, especially in the mora structure.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

These groups of the lexicon listed in the previous section are characteristic with regard to the two aspects of morphological/phonological and orthographical. From the former perspective, the most prominent point is the prevalence of the reduplicated morphemes, which is also common with the genuine onomatopoeia lexicon. The latter concerns with whether a given entry is written in kana or kanji; it is canonical to write in kanji as words of Chinese origin, but it is exceptional if written in kana. One of the important findings in this paper is the interrelation between these two facets.

One hypothesis concerning the relation between the two facets is that it depends on the frequency observed during the daily linguistic activities whether writing a given pseudo-onomatope entry in kana is permitted or not; it is not dependent on the morphological/phonological pattern of reduplication, alliteration or rhyme. It is not the case that unfamiliar entries are written in kana such as /kenken-hukuyou/ or /syousyou-seze/, in which case the readers cannot interpret the meaning of the whole phrase and/or they look quite strange, unnatural. This fact suggests that the relation between the meaning and the kanji is still too strong to be substituted by kana.

Even though the kanji is easy to read and write, if the phrase itself is literal and seldom heard, it cannot be kana-pseudo-onomatopoeia: e.g. in /syousyou-seze/, /syou/ denotes 'life' and /se/ 'world' and both of the characters are quite elementary.

It is possible, however, to substitute kanji with kana in the cases such as /mourou/, /aiai/ in /waki-aiai/, thus exemplifying kana-pseudo-onomatopes. It is because these words are repeatedly uttered in the daily life, being familiar to the speakers/hearers. We shall designate the latter example *hybrid* in which the first morpheme /waki/ (harmony) is written with kanji and the second /aiai/ with kana. Considering the usages of these morphemes, it can be pointed out that those written with kana, i.e. /mourou/ and /aiai/, are not productive in the sense that they do not appear in the other lexical usages, whether by themselves or in combination.

It is characteristic that the reversed pattern of hybrid, i.e. kana followed by kanji, is not possible. This is because the former interpretation is a substance and the latter is a

predicate in the two-morpheme compound. If the subject written in kana and predicate in kanji, it is unnatural.

The reduplication preceded by the nouns, e.g. */kyoukyou/* in */zinsin-kyoukyou/*, are contained by themselves in a dictionary such as Matsumura (1995) and Shimmura (1991), consequently classified as free morphemes. It is because they are large-sized dictionaries which contain more than 200,000 entries. Such is the scholars' interpretation, though, they are seldom uttered by themselves but accompanied by the nouns (*zinsin*). In that sense, they are almost similar to the bound morphemes.

Now we are in a position to consider the pseudo-onomatopes from the perspectives of numbers of kanji and morae.

As a general tendency in Japanese onomatopoeia, including pseudo-onomatopes, it is remarkable that even-numbered morphemes are overwhelming. In effect, all of the entries of two-kanji in Section 3 were four-mora words, except two-mora */ruru/* and three-mora */tyuutyo/*.

The AABB type reduplication is by definition even-numbered-mora without exception. The variations are 2+2, 2+4, 4+2 and 4+4. Estimating from the data in Section 3, the most prevalent pattern would be 4+4 among others.

The systematic exceptions to this 'even-numbered-mora principle' are those of noun+reduplication, since the nouns can be two-, three-, four- or any other numbers of morae. Those of the three-mora nouns among the above list are: */zento/* (future); */kikoku/* (literally, the crying of a devil); */yoin/* (afterglow); */kyouumi/* (interest); */kisoku/* (breath); */yoyuu/* (margin, room, afford); */ihuu/* (magnificence). */onto/* of */onto-rourou/* is a bound morpheme which does not combine with others. Compared with two- and four-mora nouns, it is difficult to determine whether three-mora forms are too peculiar or ordinary.

We must pay attention here to the fact that one- and five-mora nouns does not exist as far as we looked through the list in Section 3. The reason might be explained as follows. One-mora nouns are restricted due to the uniqueness of the form since there are only 100 one-mora syllable or so. Five-mora forms are too long for two-letter words; it is maximally four-mora length.

The divergence of the number of morae is in accord with that the common nouns consist of various number of syllables and morae. As far as these entries are concerned, the number of morae is diverse from one to another. It is all the more peculiar that onomatopoeia lexicon almost exclusively consist of even-numbered-mora morphemes.

## 5. KANA-PSEUDO-ONOMATOPOEIA

Kana-pseudo-onomatopoeia lexicon is most interesting from the orthographical perspective; though they should be written with kanji canonically, either the part or the whole of the phrase is substituted by kana.

Roughly speaking, all of the two-kanji entries listed in Section 3 can be written with kana. It is because these entries are of the distribution from two to four morae and completely accord with the rhythmic patterns of genuine onomatopes. The most 'radical' example of kana- pseudo-onomatopoeia is */aku-seku/*, which most Japanese speakers would regard as native.

The next extremest illustration is /kon-kon/ as in ‘kon-kon-to mizu-ga waki-deru’ (the water spring out fluently), which the ordinary Japanese speakers utter but do not even know that it is of Chinese origin and written in kanji. In this case of /kon-kon/, the homophonous entries are found both in genuine and pseudo-onomatopes of which some are listed above in Section 3; the native ones are the imitation of the sound of a cough, a cry of fox and the manner of snow falling densely (Kakehi et al., 1995). What has been explicit with the consideration here is that the sound imitations are perceived as more of native origin than manner onomatopes. The sound of a cough and the cry of fox directly reflect the physical world, but the falling of snow does not necessarily entail a sound. In that point, it is similar with the manner of water springing out.

In contrast with the above two instances are those of the AABB type; most of them cannot be substituted by kana. This is partly because most of the entries of this category are written with comparatively easy kanji, and partly because it will seem strange and imbalanced if substituted with kana. The exceptions are: /kankan-gakugaku/, /kenken-gougou/, /ruru-menmen/. The first two entries are sometimes fused such as /kenken-gakugaku/ or /kankan-gougou/, which shows that these morphemes are perceived as similar to each other in that all of the morphemes /kan, ken, gaku, gou/ are initiated with the velar stops /k g/, thus confusing between the two. In addition, these kanji are so difficult to write and that the native speakers are not necessarily conscious about the etymology or kanji. From the phonological viewpoint, these four-kanji items are long enough to perceived less likely as native onomatopoeia than two-kanji entries.

Intermediate of the two extremities is the hybrid type of noun or adjective followed by the reduplication as for the proportion of kana-pseudo-onomatopoeia within the category listed above: /waki-aiai/, /gankou-keikei/, /kosi-tantan/, /yoyuu-syakusyaku/. For the hybrid entries, it can be pointed out that half of the morpheme is written with kanji, the other half written with kana so it is easy to recover the meaning in the whole phrase. To mention it from the opposite direction, if the whole morphemes were substituted with kana, it would be strange and not understandable for the readers.

Seen individually, the expression such as /aku-seku/ is the most extreme one in that it is seldom transcribed with kanji; or rather, the average speakers of Japanese would not know that it should. The opposite end is testified in the entry such as /meimei-hakuhaku/ in which the non-duplicated counterpart /meihaku/ is explicitly perceived as of Chinese origin. The interposed between the two ends is scalar in that the pseudo-onomatopoeia lexicon includes a certain number of entries. More interesting from the linguistic viewpoint are the one like /aku-seku/, since they are phonologically similar to the native lexicon but orthographically they are in subtle status whether written in kanji or kana.

Common with these kana-pseudo-onomatopoeia items, regardless of the numbers of kanji and morae, is that the unfamiliar, less institutionalized, but frequently used kanji tend to be substituted with kana.

It can be concluded that the kana-pseudo-onomatopoeia entries are established as part of the Japanese lexicon phonologically, especially rhythmically; but it should be regarded differently from the orthographical viewpoint, since they must be written with kanji canonically. Here the notion ‘rhythmically’ denotes the moraic composition of a word or a phrase. To make it more concrete, /aku-seku/ is composed of two bound morphemes each of which

is two morae (they are also two syllables in this particular entry). Apart from that the two 2+2 morphemes are rhymed, the mora-construction is completely in accordance with the canonical Japanese native onomatopoeia.

## 6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

For the entries of pseudo-onomatopes to be written with kana either partly or entirely, the following four conditions are necessary:

1. both of the numbers of morae and kanji should be even
2. used repeatedly in ordinary linguistic level; in one sense they should be colloquial
3. kanji are difficult to write, but readable
4. bound morpheme; the kanji is exclusive for the use in the particular entry

The third and the fourth requirement are mutually related from the orthographical perspective in that the bound morphemes are likely to be used less frequently than free morphemes and become unfamiliar to the readers consequently.

It can be concluded that those entries of pseudo-onomatopes written (partly) with kana are highly nativized into the Japanese lexicon. From the phonological perspective, they are exactly identical to those lexical items of the native onomatopoeia; both are even-numbered morphemes/morae. Orthographically, on the other hand, kana-pseudo-onomatopes are in canonical in that either the part or the whole of them are substituted by kana.

As a concluding remark, I would like to postulate a hypothesis for the phonology - orthography interface in the category of onomatopoeia of Chinese origin. That is, the more familiar a given entry is to the native speakers of Japanese, the more it is recognized as if it was not of Chinese origin and can be substituted by kana. The less nativized entries are literal and should be written with kanji. To state concisely, the former category is more phonological and the latter orthographical; that is to say, the meaning of a word or a phrase is established through the frequent usages, whereas the less familiar one remains literal and the kanji cannot be substituted by kana. If the kanji is too difficult to copy and even cannot be read, it will never be taken in the Japanese lexicon in the ordinary level, as with /kenken-hukuyou/. The border of the two categories, however, is not an absolute one, needless to say.

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