

The previous essay called “Where Does the Sound TOK-TOK Come from?” introduced some Japanese onomatopoeias. Onomatopoeic words are words that mimic sounds, voices, atmospheres, and emotions. The words ① PIKO-PIKO and SHUWAHX for example, respectively mimic the sounds from objects such as electronic devices and soda water, ② OGYAH-OGYAH and TSUKU-TSUKU-BOHSHI respectively mimic the voice of human babies and insects such as cicadas (academic name: Meimuna opalifera), ③ MAX-TARI and SUX-KIRI mimic a relaxed and refreshing atmosphere and ④ WAK-WAK and HARA-HARA respectively mimic exciting and nervous feelings. Recently onomatopoeias have been attracting worldwide interest through manga (comics). This essay describes several onomatopoeias for the weather and for precipitation in particular.

Note: The character “X” is tentatively used here to express a Japanese geminate consonant or namely, “no sound, just a narrowing of the throat.”

Onomatopoeias for rain

Annual precipitation in Japan ranks third largest (1 668 mm per year in 2014) among the 34 OECD participating countries and just behind Iceland and New Zealand. These circumstances give the Japanese people special feelings about rain that led to producing a number of onomatopoeias. Typical onomatopoeias

for rain are in order of intensity POTSU-POTSU, PARA-PARA, SHITO-SHITO, ZAH-ZAH and DOSHA-DOSHA. Many of these mimic the actual sounds of rain.

POTSU-POTSU which is used for early phase of rain seems to mimic the sound of raindrops striking the ground. POTSURI-POTSURI or POTSUX-POTSUX, made by adding — RI or — X, emphasize the intermittency of raindrops. As the intensity of the rain increases, the sound PARA-PARA can be heard from raindrops hitting leaves or windowpanes. In any case, the sound “p” plays a major role in the early phase of rain.

SHITO-SHITO brings a feeling of weak but continuous rain. As one might guess from a similar onomatopoeia SHIX-TORI, this SHITO-SHITO does not mimic the sound of water striking something but rather an atmosphere or feeling of being moist and wet. These onomatopoeias give us pleasing impression as seen in the sample phrase “the mood rendered by SHIX-TORI superbly conveys delicate emotion” found in a Japanese dictionary. In contrast with this example, JITO-JITO and JIX-TORI convey an unpleasant damp or clammy atmosphere.

As the strength or intensity of the rain increases, the onomatopoeias ZAH-ZAH and DOSHA-DOSHA come to play major roles. ZAH-ZAH mimics the sound of many raindrops hitting the ground or roof, while DOSHA-DOSHA

Have You Ever Heard the Sound of Silence?

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“SHITO-SHITO”



“ZAH-ZAH”

mimics the sound of raindrops hitting the pool or puddle of water on the ground. DOSHA and DOX-SARI have the same origin as DOSA-KUSA which represents a crowded and loud situation. DOSHA can be understood as a compound onomatopoeia of DO and SHA that respectively mimics the sounds of impact and splashes.

A famous children’s song “AMEFURI (On a Rainy Day)” (Words by Hakushu Kitahara, Music by Shinpei Nakayama) has the onomatopoeias PIX-CH PIX-CH CHAX-P CHAX-P. Let us here recall the onomatopoeia CHA-PON introduced in the previous essay. The CHA-PON or plopping sound made by a frog leaping into a pond was explained as a combination of the two sounds; CHA (when the frog lands on the water surface) and PON (when that water that shoots upward after the frog lands, falls back down again). The CHAX-P in the children’s song is very similar to CHA-PON. The author thinks that maybe the sound CHAX-P came from the splashing sound of a pleasant child and a mother’s stepping into a pool. Besides these, the theme song from the movie “KOZURE-OHKAMI (Lone Wolf and Cub)” (Words by Kazuo Koike, Music by Tadashi Yoshida) has the compound onomatopoeia SHITO SHITO PIX-CHAN. It appears in the movie background music, where the lone wolf Itto Ogami walks towards his enemy in the light rain. Itto takes his son along in an armed baby buggy. The melody creates a sad but beautiful mood which is the kind of music many Japanese love. It is interesting that both PIX-CHAN and CHAX-PON have very similar sounds and rhythms.

Onomatopoeias for snow

One report states that among cities including those in United States and Canada with populations over a hundred thousand, the top 3 cities for annual snowfall are the Japanese cities of Aomori, Sapporo and Toyama. This means that Japan has a great deal of snowfall as well as rain, so the Japanese language also contains many words about snow and therefore onomatopoeias.

There are several onomatopoeias for snow as well as rain ranging according to its intensity. But there seem to be fewer stages of intensity than for rain. The beginning stage is

expressed as CHIRA-CHIRA or CHIRA-HORA. The sound element CHIRA mimics the behavior of snow falling and swaying slowly in contrast with rain that falls straight down. A similar onomatopoeia HARA-HARA is used for tree leaves and also for tears. HARA has a more delicate feeling than CHIRA. When snow changes to hail, its sound changes from HARA-HARA to PARA-PARA which mimics the sound made by hailstones striking against objects.

The onomatopoeia SHIN-SHIN is often used for heavier snow. However, since snow falls silently no actual sound can be heard. Although the onomatopoeia SHIHN supposedly mimics this silence, is it possible really to hear such a sound? Actually, we can feel “the sound of silence” even in a soundless environment. We can feel our breath or heartbeat via an auditory sensation. We express such a “sound” as SHIHN in Japanese. When we suddenly say “Be quiet!” we use the sound “SHIHX!” in Japanese and “Shush!” in English. It is interesting that both of these contain SH. However this talk has now gotten a little side-tracked from onomatopoeias for snow.

Onomatopoeias for snow are related not only to falling snow but also to accumulated snow. When we step on snow, we may hear a SAK-SAK or ZAK-ZAK sound. We might also hear a GARI-GARI or PARI-PARI sound on a frozen ski slope, and JARI-JARI or SHARI-SHARI on the same slope in spring. These may also bring back some scary memories such as the tough task of trying to escape from deep fresh snow!

(Photos: Hiroyuki Uchida)



“SHIN-SHIN”