

# A Study of Onomatopoeia Across Three Languages: International Phonetic Alphabet Transcriptions of Vocabulary Contrasted Between Japanese, English and Spanish

Jill Ann Ryan

The purpose of this paper is to examine the sounds of these three languages, with the aim of elucidating similarities, as opposed to contrastive analysis with a focus on dissimilarities.

‘As Benjamin Franklin said, when he was asked whether the science of electricity would turn out to be fruitful: “What use is a newborn baby?”’<sup>(1)</sup>

Traditionally, learning another language has focused on the four skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking. From time to time a new philosophy on education emerges, which emphasize some of the above mentioned skills, and occasionally, some combination thereof. Such concentration on one minute aspect of a language detaches the language from any connection with reality. Since it is a foreign language, it is already a different ‘reality’ from the native tongue, but the significance of that portion of the target language being studied in isolation distorts the importance of that particular feature in respect to the target language as a whole. Through the study of these fragments of language, students become convinced that their native idiom and the target language are thoroughly contrary to each other in every conceivable detail. In order to communicate in the target language, students are under the false impression that they need an exact grammatical tense or precise vocabulary expression. Instructors need to teach the students that there are

many things which are possible to communicate without specific linguistic knowledge.

Up until recently, textbooks have been written with technical acuity to the exclusion of anything remotely resembling human interaction - - - without pauses, overlaps in conversation, and non-verbal conversational responses. The 'language' contained in the textbooks and accompanying cassette tapes has been sanitized to make learners believe that what is needed to have linguistic competence can be regurgitated with some formulaic reply, resembling mathematics rather than speech. Consequently, when students are faced with an opportunity to implement the language they have studied for so many years, the experience becomes nightmarishly stressful. The learner mentally conjugates verbs from memorized lists, frantically searching for the 'perfect' rejoinder. Meanwhile, he or she is missing all the paralinguistic clues to communication - such as body language and tone of voice - and is squandering the chance to speak with someone whom they have never spoken with before (and may never have the chance again). The learner has understood that language is a subject. "English is a language, not a subject!" <sup>(2)</sup> In this respect, educators have failed by not supplying ample context and sufficient opportunity for students to use the language they have studied. Additionally, teachers have not stressed adequately that there are an infinite combination of topics humans communicate to each other, but in reality, most conversation is predictable in everyday life.

In countries such as Japan, where the government has regulated the study of English through the Ministry of Education, English has been utilized as a qualification, rather than for communication. It is an earmark of an educated Japanese person. "Language is the fundamental institution of society, not only because it is the first institution experienced by the individual, but also because all other institutions are built upon its regulatory patterns." <sup>(3)</sup> In respect to English specifically, the government decides how important English language qualifications

are, what they are used for, how it will be taught and even which textbooks will be studied. "To plan a language is to plan a society. A satisfactory theory of language planning, therefore awaits a satisfactory theory of social change."<sup>(4)</sup>

The recent restructuring of the philosophy of English education in Japan might include reference to the definition of what language is: "human speech or the written symbols for speech; any means of communication."<sup>(5)</sup> The meaning emphasizes humans and communication. In an age of 'Internationalization,' space-shuttle travel, mobile telephones and instantaneous information, the world is becoming more intense daily. It would be beneficial to teach future leaders (alias: our current students), about what humans have in common and what all languages have in common, in order to communicate more successfully and efficiently.

One way this could be done, is to teach English in comparison and contrast to Japanese and another or several other languages. Lexicon and syntax might be de-emphasized. Tests and evaluations of all types might assess international communication skills. Further, students would benefit greatly in all subjects by studying learning strategies. They could analyze their learning styles and experiment using how well they are progressing in their English studies. Moreover, students seem to enjoy lessons where they can get out of the textbook and become physically involved. Once such category is body language.

Another valuable yet unexploited area is onomatopoeia. Pupils are often delighted and surprised to hear the discrepancy between their native language and the target language while considering the sounds animals make, for example. They quickly discover that the meaning is divulged without knowing anything about the foreign language. On the

other hand, the differences convey valuable clues to the overall sound system of that language. The study of onomatopoeic expressions of everyday life make a dialogue come to life! Lack of an expression can provide insight to the culture of the target language. When learners arrive at the question, 'why do they say it so strangely,' we have the perfect opportunity to teach them about the differences in the sound systems, orthographic systems and pronunciation systems. Students will probably remember what they learn out of this lesson, since they can use so many senses while studying it. They use vision, hearing, may be touch for some rhythm practice, and their memories for imagining what the animal, for example, looks like.

Upon the first exposure to a comparison of sounds like the following illustration, students can see and hear just how similar the sounds really are. In all three languages, a voiceless velar stop is employed. The Japanese and Spanish seem more similar to each other than the English is to either, since they both start with the same sound they end on. Also, both have four syllables, whereas English has five.

<u>SOUND</u>	<u>JAPANESE</u>	<u>ENGLISH</u>	<u>SPANISH</u>
a rooster	kokekoko	cock - a - doodle - doo	kikiriki
	/kokékokko:/	/kakədu:dldú:/	/kí:kirikí /

The second representation of animal sounds by humans is the dog. In all three languages the sound is interpreted as being made twice in succession. In addition, all the languages compared include the velar voiced semivowel, 'w.' English is the only one which uses a different phoneme at the outset. All three repeat the same vowel in the first representation as in the repetition.

SOUND	JAPANESE	ENGLISH	SPANISH
a dog	wan wan /wan wan/	bow wow /baú wáu/	wow wow /wou wou/

The third is a comparison of the sound of a cat in three tongues. As represented below, the transcriptions show that the cat is virtually the same. Instead of beginning with the voiced alveolar nasal, 'n' as in Japanese and Spanish, the initial phoneme in English is the voiced bilabial nasal 'm.' The latter portion is also very similar, with the primary difference being the lengthy last phoneme instead of the more clipped ending in Japanese and Spanish.

SOUND	JAPANESE	ENGLISH	SPANISH
a cat	niao /njæo/	meow /miáu:/	niao /niæo/

This would be the ideal time to introduce a graphic representation of the vowel system of each of the languages. The students now know that although the cat 'speaks' the same language in any country, the perception of the sound is different because of the available sounds in that particular language. Refer to the following vowel charts to compare and contrast the systems. An example of a common word containing that sound would best show the variation of sounds, and teach some basic vocabulary at the same time. Sound in isolation will not be remembered as foreign language sounds, they will be recorded as sounds closest to the native tongue.

Next is an explanation of Articulatory Phonetics. The positions of the tongue and lips are illustrated in Figure 1. It is a side view of the oral cavity, as is Figure 2. Figure 2 shows precisely where the articula-

tory organs are placed for each phoneme, including the front and back of the mouth and the height of the tongue. Students should be exposed to this type of diagram from the very start of their foreign language study. Figures three, four and five, are also side views of the oral cavity, with example sounds paired with words containing that sound. By transcribing the sounds in the International Phonetic Alphabet, or IPA, students can reproduce the sounds of the target language with more accuracy than with the Roman alphabet or with the Japanese syllabry, 'katakana.' If learners know IPA before they begin to study another idiom, they will probably be better able to learn listening and speaking in another language. This will assist in reading and writing as well. By transcribing interesting words and sounds in the beginning of their foreign language experience, learners thereby facilitate earlier acquisition of the target idiom. "The term 'acquisition,' is used to refer to the conscious study of a second language."<sup>(6)</sup> Studying another language through comparison and contrast of transcription of phonemes gives visual depiction of the locations and positions of the articulatory organs. In conjunction with listening and speaking practice, the students would have technical comparisons of sounds. ". . . the most effective materials are those that are based upon a scientific description of the language to be learned, carefully compared with a parallel description of the native language of the learner."<sup>(7)</sup> This is one way of avoiding approximation of sounds, or 'approximants,' which lead to mispronouncing and misunderstanding.

## Articulatory Phonetics

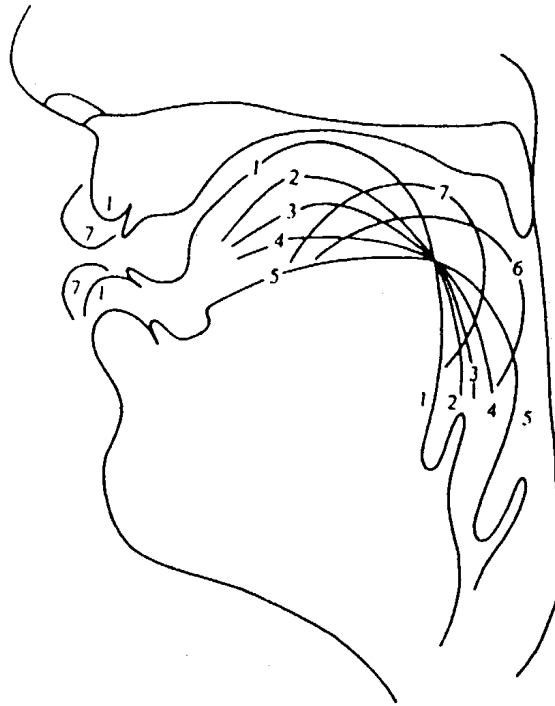


Figure 1 The positions of the vocal organs for the vowels in the words 1 heed, 2 hid, 3 head, 4 had, 5 father, 6 good, 7 food. The lip positions for vowels 2, 3, and 4 are in between those shown for 1 and 5. The lip position for vowel 6 is between those shown for 1 and 7. Ladefoged, Peter, (1982).

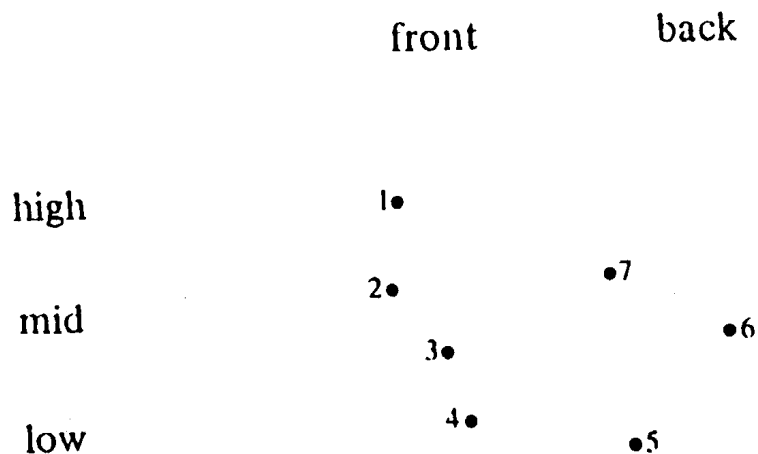


Figure 2 The relative positions of the highest points of the tongue in the vowels in 1 heed, 2 hid, 3 head, 4 had, 5 father, 6 good, 7 food. Ladefoged, Peter, (1982).

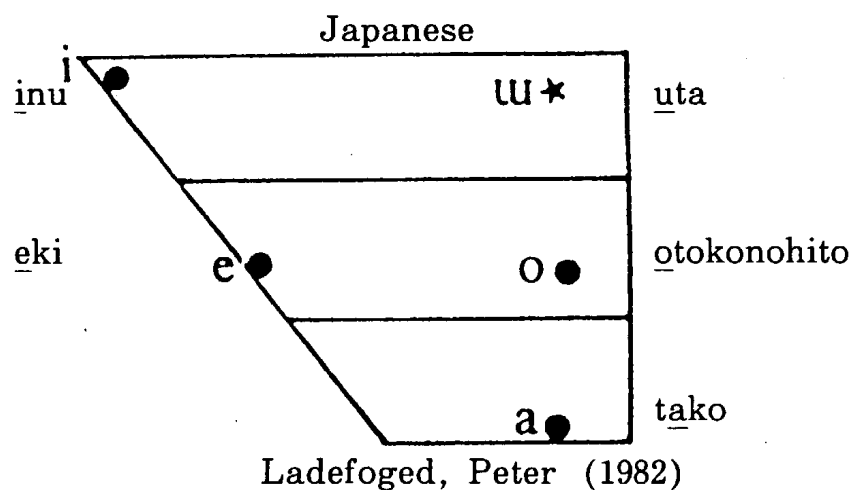


Figure 4

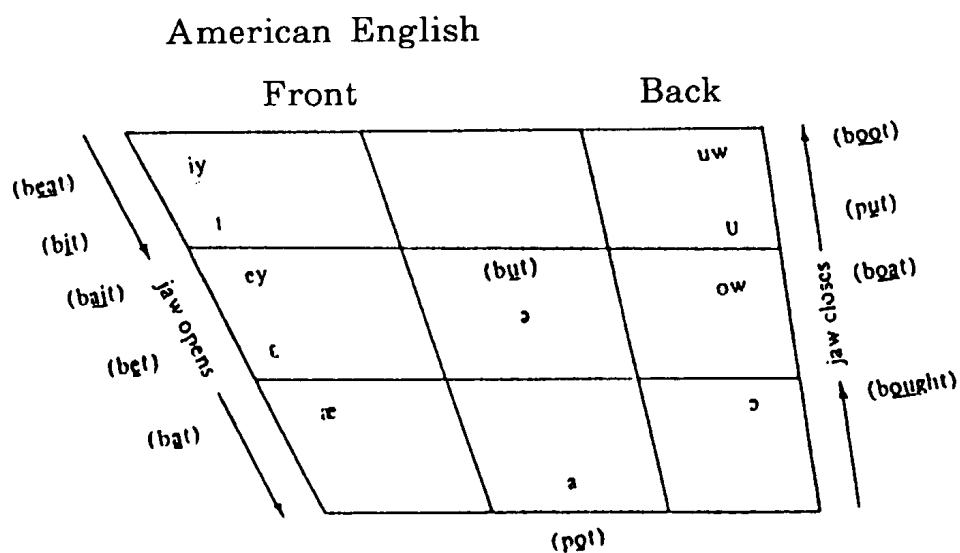
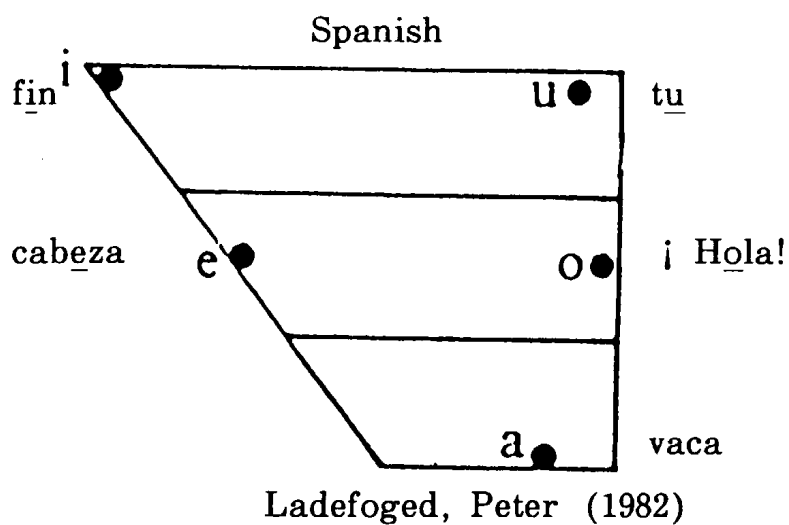


Figure 5





In addition to the languages in Figures three and four, the students are informed that “there are hundreds of languages that have only five contrastive vowels,” among them are Japanese and Spanish, where “all vowels are evenly distributed so that there are at least two front vowels and two back vowels.”<sup>(10)</sup> If the learners realize how complex the vowel system of English is at the beginning of their experience of learning English, they might dedicate more attention and/or time to understanding the fine points.

Once the students have experienced the first three similar onomatopoeia examples and have seen and understood figures one through five, it may be time to explore several other comparisons.

SOUND	JAPANESE	ENGLISH	SPANISH
a baby crying	ogya! /o:gjæ/	waaa! /wæ:/	wa! /wa/
a sneeze	hakshon! /há:kʃon/	achoo! /ætʃu:/	achi! /atʃI/
mistake	oto! /óttɔ/	oops! /u:ps/	ayee! /aji:/
heart	doki doki /doki doki/	thump thump /θʌmp /	taka taka /táka táka/
pain	itai! /itái/	ouch! /autʃ/	ay ay ay! /ai ai a í /
nonsense	mechakucha* /metčákuča/	gibberish /gíberɪʃ /	jerigonza /herígónsa/

In conclusion, the aforementioned samples of what could be taught in the classroom, were selected specifically for the enjoyment of the onomatopoeic sounds. The joy they bring to classroom, and the hints they give to the sound system of the other languages, make them a practical and worthwhile investment of time. The universality of the examples clearly show students that grammar and vocabulary are not the only necessary tools for communication. In addition, paralinguistic elements should be incorporated from the start, so that these assist communication instead of distract from it in real life. Real life communication needs to be in the classroom from the beginning as well. By focusing on grammar for example, the students cannot imagine what importance this is in the overall communicative use of language, just as the applications of electricity could not have been foreseen by most people at the time Benjamin Franklin was experimenting. As for the baby, only time will tell what use he or she is. Onomatopoeia on the other hand, clearly has practical applications in all language classrooms from day one.

\* Note: 'mechakucha' in a rough approximate of 'gibberish.'

## References

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