

A Study of the Japanese Onomatopoeias

—A graphical illustration of polysemic onomatopoeias
such as *gorogoro* and *batabata*—

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This paper will focus on polysemic onomatopoeias having several different meanings and usages which are difficult for students of Japanese to learn.

Japanese onomatopoeias can be categorized into five groups as follows:

- (1) the mimetic sounds made by people and animals such as '*wanwan*', '*pecha kucha*'
- (2) the sound of natural phenomenon or things such as '*zaazaa*', '*dondon*'
- (3) the description of appearance of things such as '*kirakira*', '*tsurutsuru*'
- (4) the description of appearance of animals or humans such as '*urouro*', '*hurari*'
- (5) the description of emotions and feelings of humans such as '*iraira*', '*uttori*'.

An onomatopoeia is considered to be polysemic when it is categorized into more than two types among these five. In 'A Dictionary of Basic Japanese Words for Foreigners' there are about 190 onomatopoeias and among these 88 onomatopoeias are polysemic ones.

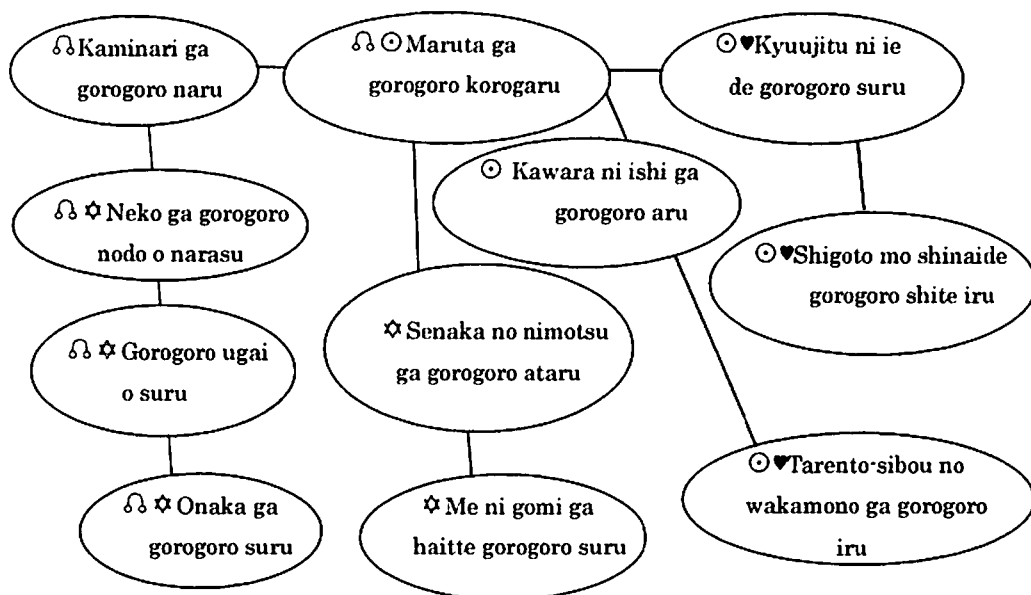
Here I will use 'gorogoro' as an example and study how its multiple meanings and usages are described in some dictionaries of Japanese onomatopoeias. Then some of the problems these dictionaries and other teaching materials will be pointed out as they have not been able to show effectively their multiple meanings and usages to the students in a clear and intelligible way.

The following graphical illustration will try to show the meanings and usages 'gorogoro' has and how these multiple meanings are inter-related with each other.

<Chart 1> is a diagram of 'gorogoro'. The icons as follow represent:

♫ : auditory perception ☉ : visual perception ☆ : sensory perception ♥ : abstraction

<Chart 1>



A diagram such as this is thought to enable a student to understand the various meanings and how they are inter-related more easily.

Vocabulary teaching has not been emphasized enough in the classroom. In addition, there have been arguments about how to teach grammar or the structure of sentences. For example, Kawaguchi in 2003 suggests that grammar can be taught as a tool of conversation through the idea of 'contextualization'. Here the same idea can be introduced in the teaching and learning of vocabulary.

Japanese onomatopoeias as a whole and polysemic ones in particular are a group of words that are difficult for students to learn. This paper will try to show how the usage of diagram such as the one above showing multiple meanings and using the idea of 'contextualization' will be more effective in introducing polysemic onomatopoeias. Further studies are necessary on other polysemic onomatopoeias and also the methods for teaching vocabulary in general.

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