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## *Onomatopoeia and Repetition*

Kazuhiko Yoshida

It is true that onomatopoeic words, more or less "motivated," are an opaque way of expression, but however successful they may be, they are not an exact reproduction of actual sounds. We cannot deny, however, that they are a very useful and important part of language.

It is worth noting that the law of diminishing returns governs onomatopoeia just as inexorably as it does that of a factory machine; that is, as we use them, onomatopoeic words gradually lose the fresh vividness they once evoked. In short, there is a definite tendency towards transparency in the development of onomatopoeic expressions. Therefore, it often happens that, even when we come across a word which is originally an onomatopoeia, we do not know that such is the case.

Doubtless this phenomenon has its own merits, but it is a great loss, especially from a stylistic point of view. This is why attempts are sometimes made to restore onomatopoeic words to their former expressiveness. And one of the successful attempts is by means of repetition. We repeat an onomatopoeic word in such a way as to emphasize its echoic nature, which otherwise is apt to be forgotten.

This device seems to have been noted as being effective even when echoic words were first created. We can see the proof of this in such creations as *bow-wow*, *flip-flap*, *ping-pong*, *puff-puff*,

*quack-quack*, *tap-tap*, and *tom-tom*. Even in this short list, two types of repetition are discernible. One is modified repetition (e.g., *bow-wow*), the other exact repetition (e.g., *puff-puff*). And Japanese is reputed to be extremely abundant in these “repetitive” onomatopoeic words.

It must be noted that the repetition of this kind is clearly of morphological nature, but, on the other hand, we see another repetition, mainly of syntactical nature, vigorously at work to make “single” onomatopoeias as expressive as they used to be.

“Never!” screamed Mrs. Nicoletis. “Never, never, never shall you have the key! Beast and pig of a policeman, I spit at you. *I spit!* *I spit!* *I spit!*”

(Agatha Christie: *Hickory, Dickory, Dock*)

I can also feel the *thud* — *thud* — *thud* of many construction works under way all over the Ginza district....

(James Kirkup: *Return to Japan*)

In the *spit* of “I spit at you,” we feel nothing very suggestive of the sound which accompanies the act of spitting itself, but the repetition coming soon after is quite echoic (cf. Japanese 「へっへっ」). The same effect is achieved in the following example by arranging side by side the two words which closely resemble each other.

He *mumbled* and *grumbled* all the time he was in the cupboard, and his face was angry and scowling when he came out.

(Joseph S. Fletcher: *The Lighthouse on Shivering Sand*)

And we can also see that much of the echoic effect in the following examples is chiefly due to the use of an exclamation mark.

You might never lose a ball for a couple of months and then *wham!* you hit the jack-pot.

(H. E. Bates: *Lost Ball*)

Before he answered she heard the first spits of rain falling softly, *piff! piff!* into the heart of the fires.

(*id.*, *Chaff in the Wind*)

In the following examples, it is surprising as well as interesting to observe that the same effects may be achieved by repeating those words which otherwise would not be felt to be onomatopoeic. And I think that the fact that they are all monosyllabic words is worth noting.

Now she did not know herself. It was always *nag, nag, nag*.

(Hugh Walpole: *The Silver Thorn*)

Wonderful to feel that arm and the temptation to take it in your two hands and to bend it and twist it and then to hear the bones *crack — crack — crack —*

(*ibid.* )

Colonel Protheroe was lying sprawled across my writing table in a horrible, unnatural position. There was a pool of some dark fluid on the desk by his head, and it was slowly dripping onto the floor with a horrible *drip, drip, drip*.

(Agatha Christie: *The Murder at the Vicarage*)

An epileptic faintness seized him, he said, "My God, my god," and clutched the table-edge. The table *shook, shook, shook*.

(Graham Greene: *The Other Side of the Border*)

The reason for this is, it may be supposed, not that there is some associative link to be obtained between the actual sounds and the words, but that the words have become the sounds themselves. In such a case, the words are not mere words, but substantial realities. Consider the following examples.

She struggled somewhere for her own power. She felt for a moment that she was *lost* — *lost* — *lost*. The word seemed to rock in her as if she were dying.

(D. H. Lawrence: *The Fox*)

She said in a low voice, "So quick — it can happen so quickly. One moment living, breathing, and the next — dead — gone — emptiness. Oh, the emptiness! And here we are, all of us, eating caramel custard and calling ourselves alive — and John, who was more alive than any of us, is dead. I say the word, you know, over and over again to myself. *Dead* — *dead* — *dead* — *dead* — *dead* — And soon it hasn't got any meaning — not any meaning at all. It's just a funny little word like the breaking off of a rotten branch. *Dead* — *dead* — *dead* — *dead* — It's like a tomtom, isn't it, beating in the jungle? *Dead* — *dead* — *dead* — *dead* — *dead* — *dead* —"

(Agatha Christie: *Murder after Hours*)

In the gold-rimmed mirror that was over his mantelpiece he saw himself *diminishing*, *diminishing*, *diminishing*.

(Hugh Walpole: *The Silver Thorn*)

In the third example, "diminish" is repeated three times, acoustically to symbolize the process of "becoming smaller" (cf. 「どんどん小さくなる」). The next example is also of the same sort.

'I hate you! You are the cause of my failure in life! You have been in my way always. *Always, always, always!*'

(*ibid.* )

We become aware of the close relationship between this English repetition and Japanese "mimicry words," when, for example, we have an English sentence like "He looked and looked," which comes to conjure up in our mind such mimicry words as 「じろじろ」, 「きよろきよろ」 as an equivalent for the verb repeated. It may be said that English is rather poor in this way of expressing manners, though, it must be admitted, the lack is well made up for in other ways (mostly by adverbs).

Here is another complicated example worth considering.

But in that very instant I heard Tassoc's voice calling to me from within the Room for help, *help* (Italics not added).

(W. H. Hodgson: *The Whistling Room*)

From this sentence, it is clear that Tassoc is asking for *help* crying "Help!" but the *help* in "— for help" does not seem to be good enough to suggest the actual word the victim was using. Therefore, a second 'help' is added so as to remind the reader that this is a kind of direct quotation, or an instance of Represented Speech.