

# Two Aspects of *Gitai-Go* in the Japanese Language and the Role of Vagueness in Interpersonal Communication

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## Abstract

In this presentation, I will illustrate and discuss how *Gitai-go* in the Japanese language work in our communication — the field of semiogenesis, considering our development as cultural being. *Gitai-go*, meaning “state imitating words”, is a group of characteristic words in the Japanese language, that frequently appear in conversations and other colloquial expressions. Although they share the same structural characteristics with onomatopoeia, they are connected not with specific sound but with state, like atmosphere, movement, texture and even our subjective impression of a person. Analyzing our use of *Gitai-go* with a consideration to our life long development, I can figure out two aspects of *Gitai-go* used in daily communication. One is our use of them as primitive expression that is closely connected with our perceptions of dynamic properties of objects. It is exemplified in their frequent appearance in picture books for very young children. Another usage that appears later in our development is, to use *Gitai-go* in order to extend or blur the field of meaning under negotiation. It can be seen in our tactical use of them in the colloquial description of others’ personality. These two different aspects of *Gitai-go* are based on one characteristic — their potential to present vivid subjective feeling that is related to visual or tactile senses, though their meanings are indefinite. After the original usage seen in early childhood, they would be re-introduced into our communication to make the most of their unique feature. Using them, we avoid the emergence of clear meaning that often brings sharp contrast of values and speaker’s standpoint for evaluation. In other words, such cultural usage of *Gitai-go* makes us open to many behavioral or relational option in inter individual relationship.

*Gitai-go*, meaning «words that imitate action or state,» is the generic name for a group of characteristic words in the Japanese language that frequently appear in conversations and colloquial expressions. Although their structural characteristics are common with *Gion-go*, typical onomatopoeia in the Japanese language, *Gitai-go* are connected, not with specific *sound*, but with *state* such as atmosphere, movement, texture, and even our subjective impression of a person.

Recently, researchers of linguistics and psychology in Japan have been examining characteristics of such *Gion-go* and *Gitai-go*, focusing on their unique potential to evoke an image (e.g., Osaka, 1999; Osaka, et al., 2004; Fukada, 2008). Based on these studies and original empirical data, I will discuss and illustrate how *Gitai-go* in the Japanese language works in communication: the field of *semiogenesis* as a semiotically and culturally mediated psychological process, taking into consideration development in the socio-cultural environment. From this perspective, I will present the way *Gitai-go*, related to the fundamental nature of the language, is used effectively among Japanese people whose thinking and communication are characterized by vagueness.

## 1. THE BASIC STRUCTURE AND CHARACTERISTICS OF *GITAI-GO* IN THE JAPANESE LANGUAGE

The Japanese language has more onomatopoeia compared to other languages. Though the exact number is not clear, a recently published dictionary on onomatopoeia in the Japanese language (Ono, 2007) has over 4500 words. *Gitai-go* is one subtype of onomatopoeia.

Like other typical onomatopoeia, many *Gitai-go* consist of simple repetition or systematic modification of specific short sounds (*Goki*, in Japanese, meaning «base of word»). For example, the sound *Kiri* can be used to construct several variations of *Gitai-go*, as follows.

- a. *Kiri-tto* shita hito. (A man who looks *Kiri-tto*.)  
– referring to a highly disciplined person with a crisp manner.
- b. *Kiri-Kiri* shita hito. (A man who looks *Kiri-Kiri*.)  
– describing a brisk person who is not at ease or comfortable.

The base of the word *Kiri* indicates a sense of the sharpness in several types of cognition and senses: for example, the subjective feelings of pain or taste, one's visual appearance or holistic impressions of a person such as his or her personality. Based on such basic meanings, the two *Gitai-go* words above also present slightly different meanings. Though both *Kiri-tto* and *Kiri-Kiri* describe overall impressions of a person, *Kiri-tto* represents a relatively positive impression compared to *Kiri-Kiri*.

When we hear such *Gitai-go* or other onomatopoeia, they arouse in us vivid images. From the perspective of cognitive psychology, Osaka (1999) supposes that the potential of these words to arouse rich imagery has its roots in our physical schemata or visual or tactile self-consciousness. On the other hand, explaining the meaning of onomatopoeia, especially *Gitai-go*, clearly is very difficult. In dictionaries, some *Gitai-go* are explained by other *Gitai-go*. For example,

one of the definitions of *Kiri-Kiri* is «the status of acting briskly, *Teki-Paki* (another *Gitai-go*)» in the fifth-edition of *Koji-en* (Shin-mura, 1998), one of the most reliable Japanese dictionaries. *Gitai-go* are words that are *vivid in their sense* but *vague in their meaning*.

## 2. ONOMATOPOEIA AS THE PRIMITIVE EXPRESSION FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

The use of onomatopoeia, including *Gitai-go*, appears in communication very early. Supporting this is the fact that many kinds of onomatopoeia play an important role in very popular picture books for young children (especially for 1 or 2 year old children) to describe atmosphere or movement. For example, Tanikawa & Motonaga (1977) created a picture book titled «*Moko, Moko-Moko*» featuring many kinds of onomatopoeia. In «*Moko, Moko-Moko*», many *Gitai-go* words such as «*Moko-Moko*», «*Gira-Gira*» or «*Funwa*» are used effectively to describe the dynamic growth and change.

It is conceivable that this early use of onomatopoeia is based on the relationship between the phonetic characteristics of these words and the dynamic properties of the event described. In her examination of the use of mimetics, including *Gion-go* and *Gitai-go*, in the daily interaction of young children and its underlying cognitive mechanism; Fukada (2008) stated that in the very early stages of language acquisition, children acquire these words based on the words' close relationship to sensory-motor experiences. Subsequently, children come to use the words to represent the salient parts of the situation or event. Fukada (2008) pointed out that the earlier use of mimetics describes the situation or event in a holistic way and the inclination to analyze the event gradually emerges in the course of development.

The use of onomatopoeia in these developmental periods can be a reflection of the fundamental properties of language. Heinz Werner, one of the theorists in earlier ages of developmental psychology, commented primitive ways of naming as such: «on the primitive level the objective world is experienced for the most part in terms of its dynamic properties (Werner, 1948/1973, p. 256),» and these experiences are «intersensory qualities (p. 257).» Though he denied seeing language as a simple copying of dynamic properties of the world, he stated that language is «the most flexible and refined instrument for expressing the dynamic-motor aspect of the object world. (p. 257)» Werner also hypothesized that such characteristics were clearer in «primitive language» and some aspects of child language. The characteristic use of onomatopoeia fits Werner's discussion.

This very *primitiveness* of onomatopoeia is related to the limitation of our semiotically mediated construction of meaning. The meaning of these words is physically grasped through their rhythm and pronunciation. In other words, these words are more directly connected to the described phenomena and the context than other words, and the clear and logical meaning does not appear. This is the reason for the vividness and vagueness of *Gitai-go* and other onomatopoeia.

This process of meaning construction can be presented using the framework of «meaning as dialogical process» developed in cultural psychology (Josephs, et al., 1999, p. 261), which employs a field-like expression of antithetical concept formation (meaning complex). As in Figure 1, the meaning of such primitive sign such as onomatopoeia are indefinite and

don't comprise a distinctive field of meaning (A) nor it's opposite (non-A) that can lead to a further elaboration or transformation of meaning.

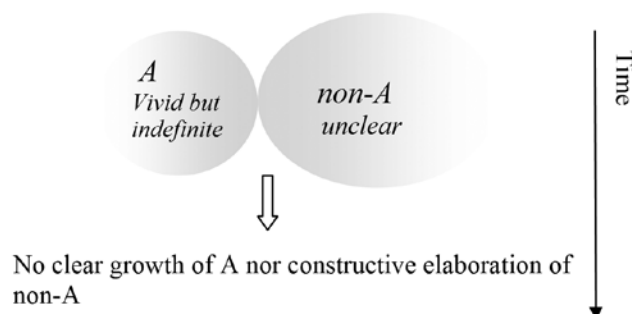


FIGURE 1. A SCHEMATIZED EXPRESSION OF MEANING CONSTRUCTION OF ONOMATOPOEIA

### 3. THE CULTURAL USE OF *GITAI-GO*: RE-APPEARANCE IN ADULT COMMUNICATION

#### 3.1 *Gitai-go* and the description of personality

In the Japanese language, onomatopoeia is not simply «primitive» words that disappear after early developmental stages. They are also culturally shared tools used in daily adults colloquial communication. One subject described using onomatopoeia, especially *Gitai-go*, is personality. Researchers of personality have not considered *Gitai-go* as the main object of their study because of their ambiguity. However, Nishioka, et al. (2006) collected the *Gitai-go* words that can describe personality and divided them into six groups (Table 1), based on the dimensions of personality that these words describe.

TABLE 1.- GROUPS OF *GITAI-GO* TO EXPRESS PERSONALITY (FROM NISHIOKA ET AL., 2006)

Group	Examples and corresponding English equivalents			
1. <i>Okubyosa</i> (Cowardliness)	<i>Odo-Odo</i>	Nervous	<i>Moji-Moji</i>	Restless
2. <i>Yuruyakasa</i> (Gentleness)	<i>Honwaka</i>	Warm	<i>Otori</i>	Placid
3. <i>Kichomensa</i> (Preciseness)	<i>Kittiri</i>	Precise	<i>Teki-Paki</i>	Prompt
4. <i>Fukigensa</i> (Irritableness)	<i>Ira-Ira</i>	Annoyed	<i>Kari-Kari</i>	Touchy
5. <i>Tanpakusa</i> (Candidness)	<i>Sappari</i>	Frank	<i>Saba-Saba</i>	Laid-back
6. <i>Keihakusa</i> (Frivolousness)	<i>Hera-Hera</i>	Not serious	<i>Dere-Dere</i>	Frilt

These *Gitai-go* words are not directly inherited from the earlier use of onomatopoeia. Among 71 words listed in Nishioka et al. (2006), 17 words appeared in the 35 hours of conversation between a child and her mother (in between the child's age 4.4 years and 5.8 years), and

the frequency was very low except for a few words<sup>[1]</sup>. However, they share the same structure as onomatopoeia used by young children, and some of the words share the same base. For example, *Fuwa-Fuwa* in the group of *Yuruyakasa* is from the base *Fuwa*, which is also modified to «*Funwa*,» that appears in the picture book «*Moko, Moko-Moko*.»

### 3.2 The effect of *Gitai-go* in personality description: two examples

Describing personality with such *Gitai-go* is common for Japanese, and at least some of these words have a unique effect in our interaction. To illustrate this, I will use two *Gitai-go*, «*Honwaka*» and «*Ottori*» that belong to *Yuruyakasa*, gentleness. In addition, I refer to the answers from 23 elementary school teachers, taken from a questionnaire that investigated their use of these words to describe schoolchildren's personality.

Example 1. *Honwaka* and the «extension of the object field»

- a. Kanojyo wa *Honwaka* shite iru. (She looks *Honwaka*.)
- b. Kanojyo wa *Odayaka* da. (She looks peaceful.)

Above are expressions using *Gitai-go*, i.e. *Honwaka* (a.) and another expression containing a *non Gitai-go*, i.e. *Odayaka* (b.), whose meaning is similar to *Honwaka*. Though the referents of these descriptions are close, *Honwaka* has a unique effect that can be called an «extension of the object field.»

The teachers' answers to the question about the distinguishing features of these words suggest the difference between them. For *Odayaka*, they referred to children's emotional stability, kindness, and gentleness (qualities that enable them to refrain from quarrelling with their friends). These are characteristics that are *not* related to the observer, but rather reside *intrinsic* to the children as psychological traits. Therefore, the speaker is in a position that is separated from the object. (Fig 2a.)

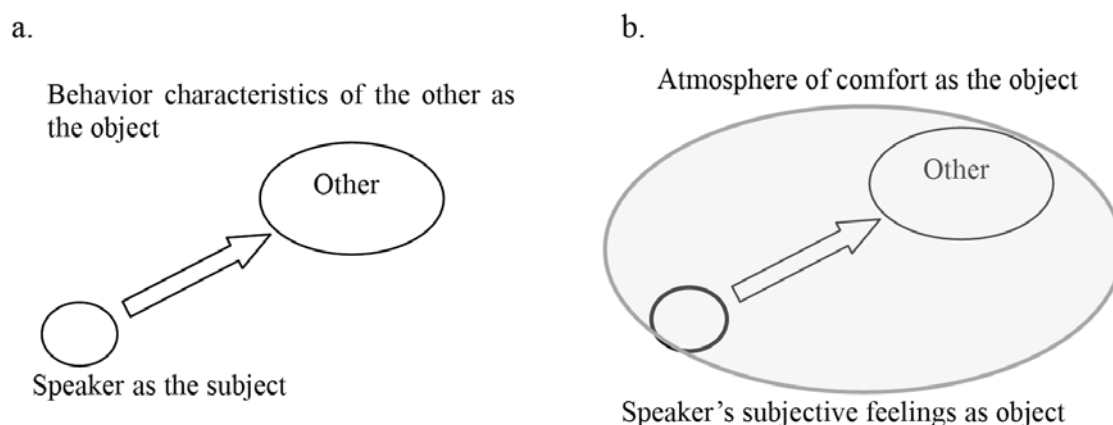


FIGURE 2. SCHEMATIZED EXPRESSION OF THE USE OF *ODAYAKA* (A.) AND *HONWAKA* (B.)

[1] Except for *Chanto* that appeared 116 times and *Hakkiri* that appeared 13 times. The frequency of each word was 5 times and below.

On the other hand, four out of 23 teachers reported that the child who is *Honwaka* makes other children and teachers *around* them feel relaxed through their characteristics. Though the questionnaire presented the words as describing the child's own characteristics, sometimes the meaning is not limited to the child, but extended to the subjective feeling of the people around the child. This is schematically represented in Fig 2b. In this example, the effect of *Honwaka* can be interpreted as the potential to extend the boundary of the object field. *Honwaka* implies the atmosphere and the subjective feeling of the people present. Further, such expressions can even represent fusion, whereby the boundary between subject and object is diminished.

Example 2. *Ottori* and the diffusion of the speaker's evaluative orientation

a. Anata wa itsumo *Ottori* shiteru. (You are *Ottori* all the time.)

b. Anata wa nandemo *Osoi*. (You are slow at everything.)

Though *Ottori* does not clearly refer to slowness in the dictionary, more than half of the teachers mentioned the slowness of children in their use of *Ottori*. Since the school curriculum in Japan attaches relatively high importance to collective activities, a child's slowness that prevents him or her from participating in activities sometimes becomes concerns of teachers. On the other hand, such slowness is also understood as an individual characteristic that must be respected.

In this context, *Ottori* can be used to describe slowness without clarifying the speaker's evaluative orientation. In use of the word *Osoi*, the referent is clearly limited to the slowness (A in Figure 3a.) and the opposite (non-A) *Hayai* (agile) is implied. These distinct expressions also clarify the evaluative orientation of the speaker (Fig 3a.), based on a clear contrast between slowness and agility in relation to school activities.

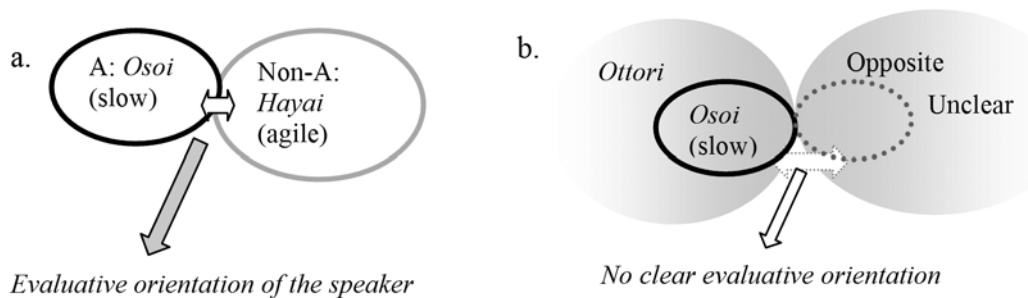


FIGURE 3. SCHEMATIZED EXPRESSION OF THE USE OF *Osoi* (A.) AND *Ottori* (B.)

In the case of *Ottori*, the meaning is not limited to slowness, but is extended to a person's generous and easygoing nature. With this extension of the meaning, the opposite of *Ottori* and the evaluative orientation is not clear (Fig 3, b.). Here, the word *Ottori* has the effect of blurring the sharp distinction and diffusing the meaning under negotiation. In addition, this type of presentation can leave the speaker options for behavior compared to a clearly evaluative orientation that leads to the behavior based on the evaluation. For example, a teacher (not a participant in the current study) reported on her uses of *Ottori* is in meeting with a child's parents. Using the word, the teacher can avoid the confrontation and conflict that a clear reference to the slowness of the child would lead.

### 3.3 The effect of *Gitai-go* and the vagueness in the Japanese culture

What *Honwaka* and *Ottori* have in common is their potential to extend the «field of meaning» to avoid a sharp discrimination. Though considering this effect as a distinguishing feature of all *Gitai-go* words is difficult, it is possible to point out the relationship between these uses and Japanese culture. As Ishida (1970) discussed, Japanese people have a general tendency to «find out beauty or virtue in blurring the boundary and not resolving objects in logical way.» The characteristic use of *Gitai-go* discussed above is a concrete example of such cultural preference.

In addition, the effects of these *Gitai-go* are also related to their «primitive» use in the very early stage of language acquisition in Japanese culture. Though the words used in adulthood are not identical to the words used in early developmental stages, the basic feature of onomatopoeia that can represent an entire event without analyzing it using detailed descriptions, still exists in the words that adults use. In our development as social and cultural beings, onomatopoeia or *Gitai-go* are «re-introduced» into our communication when subtle negotiation about an object, even an abstract entity like personality, is needed. In the framework by Fukada (2008), we make the intentional conflation of conceptualization using these words.

## 4. CONCLUSION

Onomatopoeia, especially *Gitai-go* in the Japanese language, have unique features in their structure and meaning. Though their meanings are indefinite, they have the potential to engender subjective feelings that are related to our visual or tactile senses. This characteristic is also interpreted in relation to the fundamental nature of language, which is related to the dynamic properties of the real world.

After primitive usage in early childhood, they are re-introduced into our communication to take advantage of their unique effect in meaning construction. Using some of them, we avoid expressing clear meanings that often cause a sharp contrast of values, or we describe the whole of the event in which subject and the object are inclusive. Such *cultural* uses of *Gitai-go* are one manifestation of vagueness in Japanese culture.

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