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Interview with
Kimi Akita

Bonnie McLean (BM)
Since completing your PhD thesis on ideophones in Japanese and other languages at Kobe University (Akita 2009), to your postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Tokyo and UC Berkeley, and now as Associate Professor at Nagoya University, where you've just hosted one of the largest international symposiums on iconicity (IcoLL2026), you've devoted your career to the study of ideophones and iconicity. You've written countless articles, authored several books—including a recent Japanese bestseller with the psychologist Mutsumi Imai, Gengo no honshitsu *[The nature of language] (Imai & Akita 2023)—as well as editing many more, among them landmark publications like* Ideophones, mimetics and expressives *(Akita & Pardeshi 2019) and, more recently, the mammoth* Oxford handbook of iconicity in language *(Fischer et al. 2026). In both English and Japanese, for the general public as well as scholars, you've analyzed virtually every aspect of ideophones—their phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, semiotics, typology, history, and acquisition. Tell me, what is it about ideophones that keeps you coming back for more? What makes them so special to you? I'm curious to know where this passion comes from.*

Kimi Akita (KA)
Thank you, Bonnie, for your kind introduction. What first attracted me to this word class was its seemingly random but highly systematic behavior. New ideophones can be created rather freely on the fly, but they nonetheless exhibit grammatical constraints. For example, Japanese ideophones for laughter include *ahaha*, *ehehe*, *ufufu*, and *geragera*. We also have ideophones for smiling, like *nikoniko*, *nitanita*, *niyari*, and *ninmari*. While all these smile ideophones can form verbs in light verb constructions, as in *nikoniko suru* (IDPH do) and *niyari to suru* (IDPH QUOT do), laughter ideophones generally cannot: forms like **ahaha to suru* and **geragera suru* sound odd. The same pattern extends to newly coined ideophones. If *nyaranyara* is intended to mimic laughter, **nyaranyara suru* is unacceptable. But if it's used as a smile ideophone, *nyaranyara suru* is perfectly acceptable.

Another impressive thing about ideophones is their expressive power. Let's take *ukkari* as an example. This Japanese ideophone refers to inadvertent carelessness resulting in forgetting to do something important. We use *ukkari* when we get home and realize we've forgotten to buy milk at the supermarket. It's remarkable that such a complex scenario can be compressed into a word of only three syllables!

BM
I agree, it's what makes ideophones so useful! In fact, often when I'm trying to express myself in English, the perfect Japanese ideophone for the scenario will jump out at me, and then it's so hard to try to find how to say the same thing in English without it. Ukkari *is like that, I need it far more often than I'd like… and* girigiri *is another example. It depicts two things very close together, with hardly any space in between, but you can use it in all kinds of scenarios, not only when talking about physical space, but also, for instance, space in time, like when you barely make a deadline… which is how things unfortunately are for me most of the time. Anyway, we can say "oh that was tight" or whatever in English, but you don't feel that tightness in your body in the same way as when you use* girigiri *in Japanese. There's just something so visceral about the meanings of ideophones, I guess because of their iconicity.*

KA
Girigiri feels very *girigiri* to me, too. The high front vowel /i/ is iconic of spatial narrowness, and the voicing of /g/ intensifies urgency or danger.

BM
Indeed. Before we get into this more, perhaps you could provide a brief definition of ideophones? We've mentioned their iconicity, but that's not their only defining feature.

KA
The term "ideophone" was coined by the Bantu linguist Clement Martyn Doke (Doke 1935). Similar types of words have also been referred to as "expressives" in South and Southeast Asian linguistics and as "mimetics" (*giongo/gitaigo*) in Japanese linguistics. Ideophones are imitative words like *meow* and *ding-dong*, but they go far beyond onomatopoeia. For example, in Mundari, an Austroasiatic language, *jilab-jolab* represents the "small, periodic shining lights [e.g. of fireflies] in many places" (Badenoch & Osada 2019: 138), while *sonda-sonda* refers to the "fragrant smell of beans or rice that is being fried" (Badenoch & Osada 2019: 236). Doke's original definition described an ideophone as a "vivid representation of an idea in sound" and a "word, often onomatopoeic, which describes a predicate, qualificative or adverb in respect to manner, colour, sound, smell, action, state or intensity" (Doke 1935: 118). However, it's now more common in linguistics to cite Mark Dingemanse's (2019: 16) cross-linguistic definition of an ideophone as a "member of an open lexical class of marked words that depict sensory imagery."

BM
And what do you think of this definition?

KA
I agree with Mark's definition, although I don't think it should be taken as the final version—and I suspect Mark himself would agree. More specifically, I'm not sure that structural markedness should be mentioned as such in the definition. Ideophones "depict," or are iconic of, what they represent. This semiotic property appears to allow ideophones to violate regular morphophonological constraints, resulting in structurally marked forms such as reduplication or unusual syllable structures. For example, in Japanese, initial /p/ is not permitted in native lexemes but is common in ideophones, as in *pachipachi* 'clapping' and *pikapika* 'flashing'. This marked phonology may be attributed to the iconicity of /p/ in these ideophones, whose articulatory or acoustic properties are associated with a sense of tension. In short, markedness appears to be a secondary feature deriving from the depictive semiotics of ideophones.

BM
Do you have any other concerns about the definition?

KA
I'm also interested in the common characterization of ideophones as "sensory" words. Japanese linguists often distinguish between sound ideophones (*giongo*, phonomimes) and non-sound or "manner" ideophones (*gitaigo*, phenomimes). However, it's less common to distinguish further among different sensory types of manner ideophones. If ideophones are defined primarily in terms of sensory meaning, they would resemble adjectives. Indeed, both the ideophone *pikapika* 'flashing' and the adjective *mabushii* 'dazzling' convey visual information, and both *subesube* 'silky' and *nameraka* 'smooth' represent tactile experience. However, Japanese ideophones most commonly occur as adverbs—for example, *pikapika hikaru* (IDPH shine) 'to shine

flashingly'—followed by verbs such as *pikapika suru* (IDPH do) 'to flash'. For this reason, Japanese linguists often emphasize the eventive, rather than sensory, semantics of ideophones (Kita 1997; Kageyama 2007). Unlike nouns and adjectives, ideophones generally represent dynamic events, using dynamic speech sounds to imitate them. Whether ideophones should be defined in terms of sensory modalities or eventivity might therefore be a language-specific issue.

BM
True, the meanings of many ideophones seem inherently dynamic, regardless of the sensory domains involved. While we're on the topic of ideophone meanings, I wonder if I could get your opinion on something I've also been thinking about lately, which is the relation between ideophones and abstraction. It's been argued that since the meanings of ideophones are so grounded in sensory experience, this hinders them from expressing abstract meaning (Dingemanse et al. 2015; Lupyan & Winter 2018), but lately I've been questioning whether this is really the case. The example you gave with ukkari *'careless', for instance, is not exactly concrete. What are your thoughts on this?*

KA
I agree ideophones can express abstract meaning. Japanese has numerous ideophones representing inner feelings and mental states, such as *kirikiri* 'having a sharp, stabbing pain', *iraira* 'irritated', and *unzari* 'fed up'. Ideophones are more than just imitative. Let's compare the Japanese ideophone *garagara* and its English equivalent *rattle*. *Rattle* can imitate a wide range of similar sounds, including those made by a rattlesnake, a sliding door, a train, and dishes. *Garagara* can also mimic the sounds of a rattlesnake and a sliding door, but different ideophones would typically be used for other sources: *gatagoto* for a train noise, and *gachagacha* or *kachakacha* for dishes. This suggests that onomatopoeic ideophones in Japanese encode not only auditory information but also non-auditory aspects of events. Indeed, Japanese speakers would use different ideophones for the same sound when it's presented alongside different images, like a train versus a sliding door (see Yu 2014 for a related experiment). I think this non-purely imitative aspect of ideophone semiotics enables them to incorporate abstract, even non-sensory meaning. Ideophones are prototypically imitative, but imitation doesn't capture the full range of their semantics.

BM
Yes, in fact, I was recently reading a review paper (Reilly et al. 2025) which discusses properties of abstract words, and I was struck by how many of these properties were shared by ideophones, such as the association with affective experience, high contextual salience, and their meanings residing in language. Of course, the meanings of all words can be found in language, but the semantics of ideophones have perhaps been oversimplified as being purely concrete and grounded in real perceptual experiences, when as you say to use ideophones correctly requires more than just perceptual knowledge. So the boundaries between concrete and abstract are actually blurred in both directions. Anyway, it's a bit much to get into here, but definitely ideophones as a word class are less clear-cut than existing definitions imply. In your thesis, you characterize them as a prototype category with fuzzy boundaries and this has always appealed to me. It fits with the canonical definition we have of phonesthemes from Kwon & Round (2015), under the framework of Canonical Typology. I wish we had a similar canonical definition for ideophones!

KA
Very interesting. That may be related to the fact that some researchers characterize ideophones as "highly specific" (Akita 2012), while others describe them as "elusive" (Tsujimura 2001). Perhaps both views are valid: ideophones may have inherently ambivalent semantic properties.

Thank you also for reminding me of Canonical Typology. In fact, about a decade ago, when Nahyun Kwon was a postdoc in my lab, we tried to apply Canonical Typology to ideophones. It's regrettable that we did not publish the work, as our attention was directed toward other topics at the time.

Ideophone researchers tend to focus on what constitutes a prototypical ideophone, and this is certainly a necessary approach. But to fully define ideophones, we must also consider what does not count as an ideophone. So, it'll be worthwhile to examine the diachronic processes of ideophonization and deideophonization (Akita 2009; Dingemanse 2017; Flaksman 2017). New ideophones can arise from non-ideophonic words, as in Japanese *mochimochi* 'chewy', which is derived from the noun *mochi* 'rice cake'. Conversely, many verbs and nouns have putative ideophonic origins; for example, Japanese *hikaru* 'to shine' is associated with the ideophone *pikapika* 'flashing'. Some of these ideophonized and deideophonized words do not seem fully ideophonic and appear to lie near the fuzzy boundaries of the category. I think a better understanding of ideophones can be achieved by examining the factors that contribute to increase and decrease in ideophonicity.

BM
Very true! And what do you think of the relation between ideophones and onomatopoeia? In your Oxford encyclopedia article with Mark (Akita & Dingemanse 2019), you argue that onomatopoeias are sound-mimicking ideophones that constitute a subset of the ideophone category. However, this does not seem to be a universally accepted view. Some studies clearly distinguish onomatopoeia from ideophones, while others appear to treat onomatopoeia as interjections (see Körtvélyessy & Štekauer 2024). Where do you stand on this?

KA
I now take a more moderate position. In Japanese, onomatopoeia and non-sound ideophones are formally and functionally indistinguishable. Both appear in the same set of morphophonological templates, such as reduplicated or nasal-ending forms, and are typically followed by the quotative particle *to*, functioning as adverbs, as in *piyopiyo to naku* 'to cry tweet-tweet' and *fuwafuwa to ukabu* 'to float fluffily'. Moreover, many ideophones have both auditory and non-auditory meanings. For example, *kachikachi* depicts both the ticking sound of a clock and a hard surface that would produce a high-pitched sound when struck. By contrast, English arguably lacks a clearly distinct word class just for depiction. Onomatopoeic verbs and nouns such as *clop* and *splash* do not form a coherent open lexical class with systematic features that distinguish them from ordinary words. Holophrastic sound effects—as in *He lit the fuse, ran back, and—kaboom!—the rock split in two*—do stand out distinctly, and one might say they resemble interjections. But essentially, ideophones and interjections are semiotically different categories: ideophones are iconic, while interjections are indexical.

One possible way to account for this cross-linguistic diversity is, again, to define the status of onomatopoeia language-specifically. Whether onomatopoeia constitutes a subset of the ideophone lexicon may depend on how well developed the ideophone system of a given language is.

BM
Speaking of language-specificity, are there any particularly interesting properties that distinguish Japanese ideophones from those in other languages?

KA
Japanese ideophones are particularly interesting in at least two respects. First, they've been studied extensively by numerous researchers—most of them native speakers—using historical texts, dialect materials, large corpora, and experimental methods. Ideophones are also widely discussed by ordinary speakers in everyday life. As you can see on my website (Akita 2005-2010), there are now well over a thousand publications on Japanese ideophones. This contrasts sharply with the situation in African linguistics and Southeast Asian linguistics, where ideophones are often documented by nonnative-speaker linguists through fieldwork. Japanese has therefore made a distinctive contribution to ideophone research, as illustrated by landmark studies such as Kita (1997), Hamano (1998), and Imai et al. (2008). Unfortunately, most papers and books on Japanese ideophones are written in Japanese, and I've been trying to make their insights more accessible to an international audience by citing them in my English publications.

BM
Yes, I'm constantly referring to your bibliographies of sound symbolic phenomena (in Japanese and other languages)! For many years they've been a crucial resource for researchers studying ideophones and sound symbolism, and I want to say that myself personally, and I know many other people in the field are so grateful to you for providing this resource! There's just so much research coming out of Japan all the time, and as you say so much of it is in Japanese so just making those articles locatable for English speakers is a huge service. But sorry, you were talking about the uniqueness of Japanese ideophones, please go on!

KA
Thank you, I'm glad my bibliographies are so helpful. The other unique thing about Japanese that I wanted to mention here again is that it's particularly rich in ideophones describing interoceptive experiences and emotions, such as *zukizuki* 'throbbing pain in the head or teeth' and *wakuwaku* 'excited'. Some linguists refer to these as *gijōgo* (psychomimes). Their abundance is what first drew me to the study of ideophones when I was a master's student. One day I'd like to clarify why Japanese so readily depicts such abstract concepts through speech sounds. To answer that question, we'll likely need to combine typological and anthropological perspectives.

In this connection, it's also worth reconsidering the term "ideophone." Current research often assumes that "ideophones," "expressives," and "mimetics" represent equivalent lexical classes. However, this assumption should not necessarily be taken as definitive. The lexical status of ideophones may vary across languages, just as the status of onomatopoeia probably does (Kulemeka 1995; Dingemanse 2017; Dingemanse & Akita 2017).

BM
Yes, I found your recent finding in Iida & Akita (2023) that the interoceptive quality of Japanese ideophones is actually a quality shared by the wider Japanese lexicon really interesting. I agree with your intuition that culture probably plays quite a significant role in shaping ideophone lexicons, and I hope that future work will highlight more of this type of cross-cultural variation in the expression of iconicity. And while we're on the subject of culture, we really need to talk about the column you've been writing since 2024 for NHK's monthly haiku magazine (Akita 2024-2026). I think it's so fantastic that the general public in Japan is so interested and enthused by ideophones, and of course haiku is the perfect medium to showcase ideophones'

expressive prowess. When you have a limited number of syllables you really need to make every one count, and ideophones do this so well. Could you tell us a little more about their role in haiku?

KA
Japanese ideophones are frequently used in haiku, lyrics, and other forms of verbal art. They vividly depict both the external world and people's internal states in a fine-grained way. While some haiku poets avoid using ideophones in haiku, as they can sound playful and even childish, others seem to be conscious of their efficiency and effectiveness. And they are creative enough to make new ideophones in haiku. Let me give you an example.

くやくやと思ひめぐらす春の夢

Kuyakuya	*to*	*omoi*	*megurasu*	*haru*	*no*	*yume*
IDPH		QUOT	thought	surround	spring	GEN

dream
'A spring dream filled with brooding thoughts'

(Yoshio Matsuyama)

This haiku features *kuyakuya*, which appears to have been coined from the conventional ideophone *kuyokuyo* 'regretting'. Using the unrounded vowel /a/ instead of the rounded vowel /o/, this ideophone gives a brighter image to the brooding thoughts in a spring dream. Thanks to the established sound-symbolic system of Japanese, new ideophones can be created, and their meanings can be shared between poets and readers.

More crucially, as you say, ideophones' expressive prowess enriches haiku. In haiku, we must, in principle, follow the 17-mora format (5 + 7 + 5) and include a seasonal word called *kigo*. The dense semantics of ideophones helps us pack emotionally rich, multisensory imagery into the short line without breaking the rules. Let me give you another example.

しんみりと虎が雨夜の咄かな

Shinmiri	*to*	*toraga'ameyo*	*no*	*hanashi*	*kana*
IDPH	QUOT	early.summer.rainy.night	GEN	story	SFP

'Softly pensive—a story on a rainy night in early summer'

(Rotsu Yasomura)

Shinmiri is a psychomime that represents a somewhat sentimental yet tranquil scene—one that is tinged with sadness but not overwhelmingly so. I believe the rich semantic content of Japanese ideophones is partly related to a cultural sensibility that finds beauty in imperfection and transience.

BM
That's so poetic! Do you also write your own haiku with ideophones?

KA
Not yet. I'm looking forward to composing haiku after I retire.

BM
That sounds like a lovely retirement plan. And what is your favorite Japanese ideophone?
KA

I love all ideophones, but let me mention *geragera* once again. It's often cited as an ideophone

depicting a guffaw. Indeed, *geragera to iu warai goe* 'laughter that sounds like *geragera*' is a perfectly natural collocation. However, if I say, "Please laugh *geragera*," no one can actually do it. People end up laughing *ahaha*, *wahaha*, or *gahaha* instead. Producing *geragera* while laughing is simply unnatural. This is because *geragera* depicts the vulgarity or coarseness of a laugh, rather than the laughter itself, and in that sense it's a manner ideophone. My hypothesis is that the ideophone can evoke the auditory aspect of laughter through a subjective conceptualization of a guffawing scene—playful enough to make us "hear" a fictive laugh, much like in manga. This ideophone nicely illustrates how flexible and playful the semantics of ideophones can be.

BM
I love that! It's like shiin*, or other ideophones depicting silence. Lots of languages seem to have them, even though they're a contradiction. Ideophones, even onomatopoeia, can be a lot more complex than people assume! Speaking of, are there any other misconceptions people have about ideophones, or iconicity more generally, that you'd like to address?*

KA
I think people can sometimes assume that there is a degree of objectivity or universality to ideophones, or even that this is what it means to be iconic, but this is not what we actually find. A key component of iconicity is really subjectivity, so much so that subjectivity has now become a keyword in the ongoing debate on iconicity in cognitive science (Winter et al. 2026).

Ideophones are real words, and this allows them to reveal aspects of language that might be difficult to uncover using nonce forms such as *maluma–takete* (Köhler 1929) or *bouba–kiki* (Ramachandran & Hubbard 2001). Because they are part of the lexicon, ideophones are constrained by the morphophonological system of a language and exhibit language-specific form–meaning correspondences, or "systematicity" (Dingemanse et al. 2015; see also Childs 2014). An often-cited example is the counter-universal sound symbolism found in ideophones in Bahnar, an Austroasiatic language. In this language, vowel openness inversely correlates with size, as in /halul/ 'an enormous wedged-up object', /halol/ 'a big wedged-up object', and /halɔl/ 'a small wedged-up object' (Diffloth 1994: 112).

Japanese provides another example. It has a historically based, semi-productive paradigm of sound symbolism in which /h/, /p/, and /b/ contrast in the initial position of ideophones. For instance, *horohoro*, *poroporo*, and *boroboro* can all refer to tears running down one's cheeks, with the amount of tears increasing in that order. Although /h/ does not form a natural class with /p/ and /b/, native speakers of Japanese find this sound-symbolic pattern entirely natural.

These examples invite us to reconsider the traditional definition of iconicity as resemblance between form and meaning (Peirce 1932). If the perception of form–meaning resemblance is language-specific, then iconicity itself may need to be understood as a language-specific, learned property (Akita & Imai 2022; Iida & Akita 2024, 2025; Winter et al. 2026; see also McLean et al. 2023; Punselie et al. 2024). It'll therefore be important to examine how such language-specific senses of resemblance emerge and what roles they play in language.

BM
I'm glad you mention the systematic aspects of ideophones. I think people sometimes underestimate the complexity that exists under the surface when you use ideophones. It can look like you're just inventing random words or sounds for things, but there are rules and depictive conventions and things to follow if you want to be able to integrate, for instance, a novel ideophone into the wider ideophone lexicon. You can't actually just do whatever you want, and I think it's where iconicity and systematicity come together in ideophone lexicons, and then

when you add on things like metaphor, that you get the most expressive power. Now you've written about all three of these concepts—iconicity, systematicity, and metaphor in ideophone lexicons—so I wonder, could you explain these and how they relate to each other and to ideophones?

KA
That's a thought-provoking question. As I said, I now think that lexical iconicity is best understood as a language-specific sense of form–meaning resemblance acquired through systematic form–meaning correspondences. On this view, iconicity is distinguished from the objective similarity between form and meaning that is accessible to speakers of any language—or even to infants—which may instead be termed "transparency" (Iida & Akita 2025).

As for metaphor, Japanese rhetorical theory sometimes characterizes ideophones as *seiyu* 'voice metaphor', insofar as they iconically represent various types of information through speech sounds. Non-onomatopoeic ideophones may be metaphorical in that they involve a subjective perception of resemblance between sound and non-auditory experience. For example, Japanese speakers may perceive the phonological form /tɕikɯtɕikɯ/ as resembling prickliness. It may be possible to argue that such subjective resemblance is mediated by metaphor or metonymy linking sound and touch. As mentioned earlier, *kachikachi* is a polysemous ideophone that can represent both the ticking of a clock and a hard surface. This type of crossmodal semantic extension appears to underlie the broad semantic range of ideophones in Japanese and many other languages. If I'm on the right track, the semantic range of ideophones in a language may correlate with the degree to which the relevant semantic extensions are established. However, further discussion is required to fully evaluate this hypothesis, particularly in light of the pluripotentiality of sound in sound symbolism and its relationship to crossmodal correspondences (Akita et al. 2024; cf. Hinton et al. 1994; Winter 2025).

BM
So many interesting ideas here, thank you! It gives me a lot to think about. I agree that it's good to be able to distinguish between iconicity that is acquired, especially through experience with language, and iconicity that is independent of linguistic experience—or, transparency, as you say. However, I would be wary of using terms like "objective similarity," as I think the concept of similarity itself can never be objective, since it is a process based on construal which is necessarily subjective (see McLean & Motamedi 2026). I love what you say about metaphor and crossmodal semantic extension though, as well as the pluripotentiality of sound symbolism. I agree these are really crucial to understanding how ideophones work, and I hope there'll be a lot more research into this in the future! They're topics I'm really interested in too.

KA
Thank you for pointing out the problem with the idea of "objective similarity." This is indeed something we frequently discuss in my lab as well. Even when we evaluate form–meaning resemblance in an unfamiliar language, our judgments are likely to be influenced by our L1, and possibly additional languages. For example, my ratings of form–meaning resemblance for Swahili words would likely differ from yours.

This brings us to another question: why do children learn more iconic words earlier than less iconic ones, where "iconicity" is operationalized using adults' subjective ratings (Perry et al. 2015; Winter et al. 2024)? I think scholars have assumed that the sense of form–meaning resemblance is shared between adults and infants, which may not necessarily be the case. It is likely that some form–meaning resemblances are more widely shared—or more accessible—than others, and that these facilitate children's word learning. However, I should hasten to add

that the language-specific sense of iconicity (or "iconic-systematicity" in Sidhu's 2024 terms) might also help language learning. According to Mutsumi Imai's research team, Japanese-speaking three-year-old children succeeded in generalizing verbs created from novel Japanese ideophones about 80% of the time (Imai et al. 2008), while English-speaking children had a success rate of only 70% (Kantartzis et al. 2011).

BM
Interesting, yes studies with children are a good way to tease apart the mechanisms behind these so-called "iconic effects." There is a tendency to treat form-meaning resemblances as a "silver bullet" (as Nielsen & Dingemanse 2021 put it), and I'd agree that in so doing we risk underestimating the contributions of things like systematicity and perhaps overestimating the role of transparency. In fact, as well as children, typological variation could be useful to consider here. I feel Japanese is quite an extreme example of an ideophone lexicon that is also highly systematic. Of course, the two go together, but not every ideophone lexicon is quite so systematic as Japanese, so I wonder if transparency then becomes more important, and what the effects of that are. So many interesting avenues for future research!

KA
Another great point! The other day, one undergrad asked me which language is most iconic—"transparent" in our terms—and I couldn't give a clear answer. It'd be very interesting to compare the overall degree of transparency across languages and discuss the results in terms of systematicity.

BM
Sounds fun! Now we are approaching the end of the interview, and we've talked a lot about ideophone research in general, but I think readers would also like to hear more about your own work specifically. What do you think your most important contributions to ideophone research have been so far?

KA
That's a very kind question. I believe three of my contributions are particularly important. The first is what I call the "lexical iconicity hierarchy," which I proposed in my dissertation (Akita 2009). According to this hierarchy, sound ideophones (phonomimes) are more iconic than manner ideophones (phenomimes), which are in turn more iconic than inner-state ideophones (psychomimes). The idea is that the more iconic a type of ideophone is, the more likely it is to be found across languages (see also Dingemanse 2012, McLean 2021, and Van Hoey 2024 for related proposals), and the more likely it is to occur in the periphery of a main clause. In other words, onomatopoeias such as *bowwow* and *squeak* are especially widespread across languages, and they are more likely than non-onomatopoeic ideophones to function as adjuncts. The hierarchy also accounts for the verbalizability of Japanese ideophones for laughter and smiling I mentioned in the beginning of this interview. I think these iconicity-based patterns in ideophone syntax is a type-level manifestation of the more widely reported inverse relation between expressiveness and morphosyntactic integration. The latter is a token-level generalization in which ideophones are most expressive in morphosyntactically independent constructions, such as holophrases (Dingemanse & Akita 2017; Akita & Dingemanse 2019). Both of these implicational generalizations remain hypotheses and will need to be further tested in future research.

BM
I remember in your thesis you even found the same hierarchy reflected in the acquisition of

ideophones by Japanese children. More recently, I saw it in Dutch participants' ratings of the iconicity of ideophones in foreign languages (Punselie et al. 2024). It pops up again and again when you work with ideophones or iconicity, you really laid the groundwork there for what's become a very powerful explanatory tool! What about some of your other proposals?

KA
Thank you. I think my second important contribution is my theoretical considerations of ideophones. I've applied general linguistic frameworks to the description and analysis of ideophones, including Construction Grammar (Akita 2009; Akita & Usuki 2016), prototype theory (Akita 2009), Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Akita 2010, 2013), Frame Semantics (Akita 2012, 2017a), Generative Lexicon (Usuki & Akita 2013), Leonard Talmy's "framing typology" (Akita 2017b; Akita & Matsumoto 2020), and the semantic map (Akita et al. 2024). These approaches are important to place ideophones in general linguistic discussions, as they've been marginalized in linguistics. Sometimes I even collaborate with generative linguists to evaluate which theoretical framework works better to deal with specific aspects of ideophones.

The third contribution I consider important concerns the semantic relevance of ideophone prosody. The multimodality of ideophone use has been repeatedly noted in the literature. Ideophones are often synchronized with iconic gesture strokes because of their depictive nature, and paralinguistic features such as intonation also contribute to their depictive force. In my work, I've added voice quality to this discussion, publishing several papers on its iconic function (or "phonational foregrounding"; Dingemanse & Akita 2017; Akita 2019, 2020, 2021, 2025a, b; Akita & Kawahara 2025). Ideophones are often pronounced with marked voice quality, which is usually not recorded in corpora. For example, falsetto can be iconic, or indexical, of fast motion, round shapes, or pleasure, while whispering can be iconic of small size or quiet motion. I've also observed that, much like gesture and emphatic intonation, marked voice quality tends to occur more frequently with non-predicative ideophones in the periphery of a main clause than with predicative ideophones. In the near future, I'd like to undertake a qualitative analysis of individual ideophone tokens in order to identify the specific meanings associated with different types of voice quality.

BM
Now that we are talking about the future, what other projects are you planning?

KA
As this interview has shown, many questions in ideophone research remain unresolved, and I'd like to address them one by one. I'm also currently planning a cross-linguistic project that asks the following question: when speakers of one language use ideophones, what do speakers of another language do in comparable situations? Do they also use ideophones, or do they instead rely on non-ideophonic words combined with iconic prosody or gesture? The question actually dates back to some of my earliest work on ideophones. My BA thesis was on English psychological verbs, or "psych-verb," such as *worry* and *amaze*. I had planned to continue this line of research in my master's thesis, but my supervisor Yo Matsumoto was not very enthusiastic about the idea. Instead, he suggested that I compare English and Japanese expressions of psychological states. Around the same time, I happened to learn about ideophones in Yo's course on framing typology. I was surprised to find that many English psych-verbs correspond to psychomimes in Japanese. For example, *worry* corresponds to *kuyokuyo*, *amaze* to *bikkuri*, *excite* to *wakuwaku*, and *disappoint* to *gakkari*. It taught me that ideophones need to be considered within the broader context of lexical typology rather than studied in isolation, and I'm looking forward to getting back to this. My hypothesis is that in some cases, metaphors may compensate for the absence of psychomimes in a language—for

example, *a splitting headache* for Japanese *gangan* or *over the moon* for Japanese *ukiuki*. I hope this project will help us better understand the role that ideophones play in communication.

BM
That sounds fascinating, I've always wondered why some languages (like Japanese) are so rich in ideophones, while others (like English) are so relatively impoverished. I guess we must make up for it with other means like you say. Iconicity is certainly far too important to communication to do without! I look forward to hearing more about your future projects. And as one of the most prolific researchers in the field, thank you for taking the time to share your thoughts about ideophones and iconicity with me today. It's been a real pleasure!

KA
Thank you for all your inspiring questions and thoughtful comments. It's been a pleasure to reflect on what we've studied and to consider what remains to be done. I also look forward to seeing the progress of your research. I also sincerely thank SKASE, especially Lívia Körtvélyessy, for giving me this opportunity. I hope our conversation will help readers deepen their understanding of language, communication, and the human mind.

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