



JAPAN INFORMATION
AND CULTURE CENTER
在米国日本大使館広報文化センター

TEACHING TUESDAY

ONOMATOPOEIAS

Much like English uses words like “ka-boom!” or “meow”, Japanese also has a wide range of words that have meaning indicated by the sounds they mimic. These onomatopoeias are broken down into three categories. The first, giseigo (擬声語), are the sounds that people and animals make. The second are sound effects like the words above, mimicking a sound to describe something, which is called giongo (擬音語). However, Japanese also has something called “Japanese sound symbolism,” where an onomatopoeia is used to describe something that doesn’t actually make sound. This is called gitaigo (擬態語).

Giseigo are pretty straight-forward, and simply onomatopoeias of human or animal noises. For instance, nyaa nyaa (ニャニャ), is the sound of a cat meow (which you may recognize from the Internet phenomena, Nyan Cat) or kusu kusu (<す<す), which is the sound of someone laughing quietly. Giongo are all sounds that don’t come out of the mouth of a human or animal, such as goro goro (ごろごろ) for thunder rumbling or kata kata (カタカタ) for typing on a computer. Gitaigo words, however, are more abstract than the giongo words, and are used to describe an action, like a facial expression, or an emotion, or feeling, with an associated sound. These include giyougo (擬容語) and gijougo (擬情語), which describe movement and emotions respectively. So, uro uro (うろうろ) is a giyougo meaning to wander aimlessly, and moya moya (もやもや) is a gijougo meaning to worry.

Japanese onomatopoeias are also very flexible — they can be used as nouns, adverbs, or verbs. For instance, the Japanese onomatopoeia for silence, shiin (しいん), can be used to mean “silently” (しいんと), silence itself (しいん), or “to be silent” (しいんとする).