You might think that “hail” would be a pretty straightforward word describing frozen hard things dropping from the sky. You’d be wrong. It turns out that there is a variety of frozen hard things dropping from the sky, for example, hailstones, soft hail, sleet, graupel, and snow pellets. Some of these happen in winter, some in summer. Moreover, various cultures regard these phenomena differently. There are even differences between British and American usage. Before looking at the way these basic terms are used in haiku, let’s dwell a moment on definitions.

Hail is the most generic word. *Encyclopædia Britannica* says “[any] solid precipitation in the form of hard pellets of ice that fall from cumulonimbus clouds is called hail.” Britannica then distinguishes three basic types:

**True hailstones**—“hard pellets of ice, larger than 5 mm (0.2 inch) in diameter, that may be spherical, spheroidal, conical, discoidal, or irregular in shape and often have a structure of concentric layers of alternately clear and opaque ice.”

**Snow pellets or soft hail**—“which are white opaque rounded or conical pellets as large as 6 mm (0.2 inch) in diameter. They are composed of small cloud droplets frozen together, have a low density, and are readily crushed.” Soft hail is also called graupel (from the German word *Graupel*) a term used by meteorologists and increasingly by the English-speaking public.
Sleet—“globular, generally transparent ice pellets that have diameters of 5 mm (0.2 inch) or less and that form as a result of the freezing of raindrops or the freezing of mostly melted snowflakes. In Great Britain and in some parts of the United States, a mixture of rain and snow is called sleet, and the term has sometimes been used to identify the clear ice on objects that is more correctly known as glaze.” In the main “Hail” article, the encyclopedia calls this phenomenon Small hail (ice grains or pellets).

Clear so far? Yeah, not to me either. But let’s turn to the Japanese equivalents. Gabi Greve, in her wonderful online World Kigo Database, identifies the following basic terms:

雹 hyō — hail, especially hailstones, a kigo for all summer. Greve writes: “Hail usually comes with the summer storms and is known to destroy the rice harvest in just one go. The grains range from rather small to big as an apple or a man’s fist.” Other related summer kigo are 氷雨 hisame — ice rain or freezing rain and 雹の大降り hyō no óburi — hailstorm.

霰 arare — snow pellets, winter hail, soft hail, or graupel. Arare is a kigo for all winter. Greve also lists these related all-winter kigo: 玉霰 tamaarare — jewel-like pellets or hail balls), 雪あられ yukiarare (mixed snow and hail).

霙 mizore — sleet, as well as 雪交ぜ yukimaze — sleet mixed with snow.

It is also permissible to use the winter kigo in spring haiku by specifically mentioning the season: 春の霙 haru no mizore or 春みぞれ harumizore (sleet in spring), 春の雹 haru no hyō (hail in spring), and 春の霰 haru no arare (snow pellets in spring).

Hyō — hail — is a rarely used word in Japanese haiku; I find only five Japanese haiku translated into English that use this summer kigo. Perhaps the most interesting are these two:
雹はれて豁然とある山河かな

*hyō harete katsuzen to aru sanga kana*

The hailstorm cleared up,
And hills and rivers
Lie stretched out.


君はいま大粒の雹君を抱く

*kimi wa ima ōsubu no hyō, kimi o daku*

You are now
an enormous hailstone,
so I hug you


Although it is technically not “hail” but rather “graupel” or “snow pellets,” *arare* is the word most often used by Japanese haikuists for wintertime hail. The best-known and oft-translated haiku is surely this one of Santōka’s:

鉄鉢の中へも霰

*tetsu hachi no naka e mo arare*

Into the begging bowl, too, hailstones

*Santōka, trans. Hiroaki Sato, Cicada 2:2 (1978)*

Here translator Sato renders *arare* as “hail”; of the twenty-two versions of this haiku that I have found, all have “hail,” and both my English-Japanese dictionaries prefer “hail” as the primary translation of *arare*. Bill Higginson noticed this peculiarity as early as 2001 and reported his research to Gabi Greve at the *World Kigo Database*: “Collating the descriptions in the saijiki with North American weather guides has led me to believe that ‘hail’ is a bad translation of *arare*, which makes much better sense as ‘graupel’ (technical meteorological name) or ‘snow
pellets’ (common name). Hyō, on the other hand, does seem to pair well with ‘hail.’” [My dictionaries prefer “hailstones” as a translation for hyō. ~CT]

In *Haiku World*, Higginson calls *arare* “snow pellets” or “graupel” and explains the translation problem, writing “the [*arare*] phenomenon is common in Japan, where graupel frequently mixes with snow or rain, and is therefore the first image of hard precipitation that comes to mind, accounting for the fact that *arare* occupies the figurative niche in Japanese that is occupied by ‘hail’ in English.” In accord with Britannica’s scheme in which hail(stones), sleet, and graupel are all types of hail, and if one thinks “(soft) hail,” I think *arare* can be translated as “hail.”

*Arare* is, in fact, a popular *kigo* in Japanese haiku. Bashō and Buson each wrote six haiku on the topic, Chiyo-ni at least one, Santōka at least two, and Shiki more than a hundred. A first reading of the Santōka begging-bowl haiku above suggests that the hail emphasizes the emptiness of the bowl, the absence of anything but the hailstones. I submit, however, that the key sense involved is not sight, but sound. It is the rattling of the *arare* that triggers the pathos of the image. Here is a short selection of other Japanese haiku about the sounds of *arare* to make my point:

いかめしき音や霰の檜木笠

*ikameshiki oto ya arare no hinoki-gasa*

Harsh sound—
hail splattering
my traveller’s hat.  

*Bashō, trans. Lucien Stryk, On Love and Barley (1985)*

呉竹の奥に音あるあられ哉

*kuretake no oko ni oto aru arare kana*

there is a sound inside
The black bamboo—

The hail!  

雑水に琵琶聴く軒の霰哉
zōsui ni biwa kiku noki no arare kana

with rice gruel
listening to a lute under the eaves
hailstones

Reichhold explains: “The sound of the Japanese lute (biwa) has often been compared to the sound of hailstones falling on a thatched roof.” Interestingly, Reichhold uses the words “jewel” and “hailstone” together for tamaarare in her translation of another Bashō haiku:

いざ子供走りありかん玉霰
iza kodomo hashiri arikan tamaarare

now children
come run among jewels
hailstones

Mizore—sleet—is presented as an unpleasant aspect of winter weather in Japanese haiku. It is often visualized as mixing with arare—graupel—or, more often, with snow or freezing rain. In fact the translators of the following haiku use the kanji for arare but the rōmaji mizore:

琳しさの底ぬけて降る震かな
sabishisa no soko nukete furu mizore kana

Unfathomed loneliness
Breaks through—
Falling sleet!

Naitō Jōsō, trans. Ichikawa Sanki et al.,
Haikai and Haiku (1958)
While puzzling over cold lumpy things falling from Japanese skies, I came across this haiku that sums it all up:

松山にひょおかあられか論じおり
*Matsuyama ni hyō-ka arare-ka ronji ori*

in Matsuyama
heatedly discussing if it's
hail or frozen dew

*Dhugal J. Lindsay, Fuyoh 2 (1995)*

*Mizore* is a fairly common *kigo*, used in classic haiku by Buson, Issa, Shiki, and many others, though not by Bashō or Chiyo-ni. Buson’s “old pond” haiku is the most-translated sleet haiku:

古池に草履沈みてみそれかな
*furu ike ni zōri shizumite mizore kana*

In an old pond
a straw sandal half sunken—
wet snowfall!

*Buson, trans. Yuki Sawa and Edith Marcombe*

*Shiffert, Haiku Master Buson, 1st ed. (1978)*

None of the translators I have seen make it clear exactly where the sandal is positioned in the pond: Eric Amann says it “sticks to the bottom,” W. S. Merwin and Takako Lento say it’s “at the bottom,” Blyth has it “sunk to the bottom,” Robert Hass has “half sunk,” both Saga Hiroo and Allan Persinger have it “sinking,” and Stephen Addiss says simply “submerged.” I interpret the point of this haiku to be someone having lost a sandal in the pond, and his or her misery compounded by cold, unpleasant sleet. Such a dark mood is characteristic of other *mizore* haiku as well:

ゆで汁のけぶる垣根もみぞれふる
*yudejiru no keburu kakine nari mizore furu*
steam from boiling soup
a fence . . .
falling sleet

Issa, trans. David G. Lanoue,
Haiku of Kobayashi Issa Website

Lanoue asks, “Is Issa implying that the steam from his soup will
protect him from the cold world outside—the falling sleet?” I
would think that Issa sees the steam from the boiling soup on the
far side of the fence, while on his side is only the cold sleet—sort
of “the grass is greener” idea.

しみじみと子は肌につくみぞれかな
shimijimi to ko wa hada ni tsuku mizore kana

Pressing the child
Closely to my body,
Sleet falling.

Ogawa Shūshiki-jo, trans. R.H. Blyth,
A History of Haiku 1 (1963)

おもい見るや我屍にふるみぞれ
omoimiru ya waga shi-kabane ni furu mizore

Imagining sleet
pelting
on my corpse.

Hara Sekitei, trans. Lucien Stryk,
Cage of Fireflies (1993)

Both Higginson and Greve mention hisame, “ice rain” (or
presumably “freezing rain”) as a variation of hail and a summer
kigo, but neither provides a sample haiku. My Haiku Database
includes only one haiku using hisame, so I conclude that it is not
in common use in haiku.

Haiku about hail—the large, hard, summer kind—number
275 (about one in a thousand haiku in English) in The Haiku Data-
base, moderately frequently, I’d conclude. This category seems to
invite many mediocre haiku as poets struggle to find meaning for
their haiku beyond mere observation. Here are two exceptional
hail haiku that may at first appear to be simple observations but lead the reader to deeper thoughts:

Hailstones
through
the spider’s web

*Peggy Willis Lyles*, *Tightrope* (1979)

deserted park  hail on the chessboard


Just as we saw with *arare*, the sound of hail is something that inspires poets. Falling hail is often described using violent verbs such as splatter, clatter, rattle, beat, drum, pelt, pound, or thump. Popping popcorn, war drums, music of various kinds, tennis balls, and other clamor are evoked:

hail in the woods
my maul and hammer
ring

*Brent Partridge*, *Modern Haiku* 20:3 (1989)

into
the
rain-
filled
bucket
so
softly
hailstones

*Carolyn Hall*, *Acorn* 5 (2000)

Mostly the sound of hail evokes human misery or isolation:

the sound of hail
knocking on the glass roof—
my loneliness

*Olivier Schopfer*, *Modern Haiku* 45:2 (2014)
summer hail storm—
sharing the bus shelter
with Mormons


A few haiku deal with the destructiveness of a hailstorm—nothing as terrible, perhaps, as the Seventh Plague that Moses faced (*Exodus* 9:13–35), but still enough to threaten life and livelihood:

hailstorm
the farmer and his wife
holding hands


So close to harvest—
hailstones melting in
my father’s hand


Many more haiku are concerned about the effects of hail on flowers, especially, of course, cherry blossoms:

cherry blossom rain
sunlit tulips crimson
on hailstone bed


Not surprisingly, hail is often used as a metaphor:

the falling hail
across the old battlefield
cairn after cairn

*David Cobb*, *Jumping from Kiyomizu* (1996)

carving hearts in birch bark hailstones bruising

*Bill Pauly*, *Cicada* 2:3 (1978)
On the lighter side, people enjoy watching the antics of falling hailstones:

Yesterday locusts
lunched happily here...Today
hail jumps in the grass.  
*Evelyn Tooley Hunt,*
American Haiku 2:2 (1964)

left outside
in a hailstorm
a pogo stick  
*Alan Pizzarelli,* The Windswept Corner (2005)

Some people find unusual uses for hailstones:

summer thunder storm
saving the hail stones
for her iced tea  

Family reunion...
Grandma takes the hailstone
from the freezer  

I have found no haiku in English using “graupel.” “Soft hail” is used only once, “ice pellets” three times, and “snow pellets” twice, including:

Snow pellets pinging
glass—a cardinal
flits to our feeder  

I have collected about 250 English-language haiku mentioning sleet. For anglophone haiku poets, sleet can occur at any time of year, though the haiku tend to cluster in early spring. Again, sound is an important aspect:
sleet rattles
brown leaves
a hunter’s distant shots  

Jack Barry, Swamp Candles (2006)

At the windowpane,
sleet; and here in the dark house—
a ticking of clocks.

O Mabson Southard, American Haiku 1:1 (1963)

sleet against the window
at last mother threads
the needle  

George Swede, Almost Unseen (2000)

breaking the silence
of Mama’s knitting needles
the click-click of sleet

Raymond Roseliep, Sailing Bones (1978)

A more important aspect, however, is the sheer misery of being outside in a sleet storm and the way it engenders loneliness and despair:

death of an old friend
a train’s horn
through miles of sleet  

Dave Russo, Acorn 14 (spring 2005)

sleet:
the color of their eyes,
these homeless


Easter sleet storm
the parking lot full
at the nursing home  

Marsh Muirhead, Modern Haiku 38:3 (2007)
invalid brother's molars in a jar    soft sleet


Slush and sleet of March
    and a small mutt at someone’s door
    wailing to get in.

  Marjory Bates Pratt, American Haiku 2:2 (1964)

evening sleet
    the koi wait it out
    under the bridge


early spring sleet
    driving through Switzerland
    to where I might die

  J. Zimmerman, Frogpond 37:3 (2014)

sleet
    hones
    farewell

  Raymond Roseliep, Cicada 5:3 (1981)

Sleet seems to have a profound effect on interpersonal communications, both positive and negative:

St Valentine’s Day —
    sleettflakes drifting
    into last year’s nest

  David Cobb, Snapshots 6 (1999)

the sound of sleet when there’s nothing left to say


looking away from each other
    tick of sleet
    on the car roof

rain becomes sleet
the secrets
we take to the grave

*Billie Wilson, Mariposa 31 (2014)*

In haiku, semi-solid sleet is often changing to another state:

asking him to stay—
snow turns to sleet
then to rain

*Kathe L. Palka, Bottle Rockets 14:2, #28 (2013)*

sleety rain
the flowered umbrellas
sold out

*Adelaide B. Shaw, The Heron’s Nest 12:2 (2010)*

Many poets use sleet to express irony, and enjoy the contrast be-
tween the wintry sleet and the signs of spring:

Winter sleet—
upon the poplar branch…
a chrysalis.

*John Wills, Back Country (1969)*

dried tadpole
stuck with a pin—
ticking sleet

*Michael Dylan Welch, Betty Drevniok Award, HM (2001)*

as well as other incongruities:

cutting posts—
the sizzle of sleet
on the chainsaw housing


winter wedding:
sleet and rice together
pelt the newlyweds

*Emily Romano, Wind Chimes 3 (1981)*
sweatlodge
out of the earth’s steaming womb
into sleet and lightning

Don Eulert, Field (1998)

And to wrap up (so to say), we’ll cite Bill Higginson again, this time with his grand summary of spring weather:

rain, sleet,
ice pellets, snow, this
hour of spring

William J. Higginson, Gossamer (2003)

Notes:

1. A *Field Guide to North American Haiku* is a long-term project along the lines of a haiku encyclopedia-cum-saijiki, a selection of the best English-language haiku arranged by topic and illustrating what it is about a given topic that attracts poets to write. When complete, the Field Guide project will comprise multiple thick volumes keyed to the several topics in traditional Japanese *saijiki* (haiku almanac) and Western counterparts, notably William J. Higginson’s *Haiku World: An International Poetry Almanac* (1996). These topics are: Season, Sky & Elements, Landscape, Plants, Animals, Human Affairs, and Observances. The current compilation presents “Sky & Elements: hail; sleet; and graupel.” The haiku are selected from my Haiku Database, currently containing more than 365,000 haiku, and are offered as prime examples of haiku in English that illuminate our points. Publishing these miniature topical haiku anthologies is an experiment to test the feasibility of the larger Field Guide project. Critique and suggestions, supportive or critical, are warmly invited; please comment by e-mail to trumbullc\ at\comcast.net.


