Transition to a 2-Type Accent System in Tokyo Japanese?
The Behavior of Surnames

In the Tokyo Japanese pitch-accent system, content words are lexically specified for accent. For a noun with n syllables, there are $n+1$ possibilities for accent location: it may be accented on any of the syllables, or it may be unaccented. For a verb or adjective form, there are generally at most two possibilities (accented on a predictable syllable or unaccented), regardless of the number of syllables. Furthermore, nouns with n syllables are nowhere near evenly distributed among the $n+1$ possibilities (Kubozono 2006:13–15). About half of all nouns in Tokyo Japanese are unaccented, and among accented nouns that contain at least two moras, the great majority have the default accent location (McCawley 1968:133–134; Kubozono 1989:250; Kubozono and Honma 2002:36–38), that is, accent on the syllable containing the third mora from the end (the second mora from the end if there are only two moras). It is not far-fetched to predict that Tokyo Japanese will eventually develop a simpler, 2-type accent system, with accented vs. unaccented as the only distinctive feature.

In an eye-opening study of a Kagoshima dialect that already has a 2-type system, Kubozono (2007) describes how Tokyo "standard" Japanese has influenced the lexical accent of individual words. In a nutshell, some unaccented Kagoshima words have shifted to the accented type when the corresponding Tokyo word is accented, and some accented Kagoshima words have shifted to the unaccented type when the corresponding Tokyo word is unaccented. The basic Kagoshima system is unchanged, and the actual pitch patterns on the shifted vocabulary items are often quite unlike the pitch patterns on the Tokyo items that have influenced them. It thus appears that the abstract distinction between accented and unaccented is highly salient for native speakers of this dialect. Is there any support for the notion that this same accented vs. unaccented distinction is salient in something like the same way for native speakers of the Tokyo dialect?

Surnames are a subclass of nouns, and for all practical purposes, they already conform to a simpler 2-type system in the Tokyo dialect (Akinaga 1998:184–185; Kindaichi and Akinaga 2001[appendix]:30–31). For example, given the 3-syllable surname /fuǰita/ 藤田, there are only two possibilities: unaccented /fuǰita/ or accented /fuˈǰita/. A speaker simply has to remember that the accented alternative is correct in this case.

Some surnames, though only a small minority, are based on monomorphemic nouns, and these are especially interesting in terms of accent. For example, the unaccented surname /mori/ 森 corresponds to the unaccented common noun /mori/ 'forest', and the initial-accented surname /seˈki/ 関 corresponds corresponds to the initial-accented common noun /seˈki/ 'barrier'. However, the surname based on /taniˈ/ 谷 'valley' is /taˈni/, and the surname based on /tokoroˈ/ 所 'place' is /toˈkoro/. These examples suggest that a surname based on a common noun is unaccented when the related noun is unaccented and accented when the related noun is accented, but that an accented surname has the default accent location regardless of the accent location on the related common noun. This pattern is like the pattern of Tokyo influence on the Kagoshima dialect described above.

Unfortunately, there are obvious exceptions to the proposed generalization, such as the surname 星 /hoˈši/ (based on unaccented /hoši/ 'star') and the surname 堀 /hori/ (based on accented /hoˈri/ 'moat'). In the results of a survey study with 11 speakers raised in Tokyo as participants, the proposed generalization holds up as a statistical tendency, but the exceptions are far too numerous to ignore. Most of the items that contradict the generalization are cases where the common noun is unaccented (like /hoši/) but the surname is accented (like /hoˈši/).

We will also report the results of a second study (currently in progress) on how Tokyo speakers treat pseudonyms based on monomorphemic common nouns, such as the surnames adopted by writers and entertainers. The preliminary indications are not promising. Given the

prodigious memory that ordinary speakers seem to have for the details of pronunciation, it is perfectly plausible that Tokyo speakers just memorize the accent pattern on each monomorphemic surname they encounter, one by one. And if so, the behavior of these surnames is just one more frustrating aspect of the Tokyo accent system for non-native learners.

References

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