

The role of prosody in Japanese: the use of accentual information in spoken word recognition by L1 and L2 speakers

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This study examines the role of pitch accent in the perception of Japanese words by native speakers of Japanese with and without pitch accent in their variety and by L2 students of Japanese with and without pitch accent in their L1. It follows up previous research findings of perceptual prosodic differences among different language background groups (Hirata, Ayusawa, Nakagawa, & Odaka, 1997; Otake, 2002).

Laboratory-based spoken word recognition experiments were carried out. Speakers with different suprasegmental backgrounds were tested on how their L1 properties influenced word recognition. The L1 Japanese subjects included 17 speakers (from Tokyo) of the standard variety with lexical pitch as well as 17 speakers (from Ibaraki) of a variety without lexical pitch. The L2 Japanese subjects included 17 L1 speakers of English (from Oxford) without lexical pitch in their L1 and 24 L1 speakers of Norwegian (from Oslo) with lexical pitch in their L1. A gating test (Grosjean, 1996) revealed how much acoustic-phonetic information was needed for subjects to identify a lexical pitch accent word. A word discrimination test using Japanese pitch accented words was also employed to determine how native pitch accent patterns influenced word recognition.

A significant difference between the L1 and L2 groups was observed. The results also revealed that the L1 non-pitch accent variety impeded the perception of pitch accent in standard Japanese to some extent. Contrary to expectations, speakers of Norwegian demonstrated tendencies similar to those of native English speakers. The non-native groups showed a lower level of internal consistency in test performance, and some of the factors involved were examined by looking at individual differences within the groups. One of the factors influencing this result was the kind of Japanese the L2 speakers had been exposed to. Further research would be required to investigate these and speakers' sociolinguistic factors which might influence pitch contrast performance. This study might also contribute pedagogical implications to Japanese teaching as foreign language, including the role of pronunciation.

References

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