

Vowel coalescence in colloquial Japanese: Phonological and non-phonological factors

1. Synopsis

The present study examines the phenomenon of variable vowel coalescence in colloquial Japanese (e.g. /▲ma-i/ → [▲me:] ‘tasty’) in terms of phonological and non-phonological factors. The results of a large-scale rating experiment suggest that vowel quality, various faithfulness requirements, and speaker gender are good predictors for the process while speaker age is not.

2. Introduction

In casual speech, Japanese ▲-adjectives may undergo vowel coalescence, as shown in (1) below.

- (1) jaba▲-i → jabe: ‘awful/awesome’ sa▲go-i → sa▲ge: ‘terrific’ dan▲r-i → dari: ‘weary’

The phenomenon has long been studied in the literature (Kawakami 1977, Kubozono 1999, 2015, Kawahara 2002, Kawai 2004, Inada 2008, etc.), but its variability has yet to be thoroughly investigated. The alternation does not seem to apply to all adjectives, as illustrated in (2).

- (2) aka▲-i → ake: ‘expensive’ but ja▲s-i → ?jaɕi: ‘cheap’
aka▲-i → ake: ‘red’ but ao▲-i → ?ae: ‘blue’

It is also somewhat stigmatized and not equally acceptable for all speakers. Some researchers associate it to young male speech (see Kawakami 1977; Vance 1987, 2008).

This study aims to address the issues of word- and speaker-based variability. More specifically, I test whether phonological factors, such as input vowel quality (/...a-i/, /...o-i/, /...▲-i/) and consonantal change (e.g. /s/ → [ɕ] caused by following [i:] as in (2) ‘cheap’), as well as non-phonological factors, such as speaker gender and age, affect the process’s acceptability.

3. Method

I designed and ran a web-based rating experiment. 721 Japanese speakers (371 females, 335 males, 15 others/no answers; mean age: 40.31, SD: 10.0) participated. The stimuli were 342 common ▲-adjectives taken from an on-line dictionary (’ -

ing scores include consonant faithfulness (no change or deletion of a stem consonant; e.g. /sri/ → ?[s^hri:] due to palatalization; /kijo-i/ → ?[ki e:] 'pure' due to *je), noun faithfulness (no change in a denominal adjective; e.g. /manri/ → ?[mari: