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# Trends of Linguistic Variations in Modern Japan

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## 0. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, large-scale linguistic trends in Japan will be discussed from the viewpoint of social dialectology. In the past the most significant varieties within the Japanese language have been geographical dialects. Recently however, the most significant linguistic varieties seem to have become social ones.

Overall linguistic trends show that the linguistic situation of Japanese society has changed. From the standpoint of individual speakers, the differential usage of dialect, standard language and honorifics was important for daily communication in the past. In contrast, differential usage of (at least perceptive) loanwords from English and kinds of "group language" are becoming more noticeable recently. In other words, geographical differences have become less conspicuous and social group differences more conspicuous.

This paper outlines the general orientation of the recent Japanese linguistic situation. Various linguistic phenomena are treated here in order to show concretely that linguistic changes in progress can be observed at many levels of language.

Linguistic variety is manifested in many levels of the linguistic system, listing from greater to smaller variety: from language in an area, through dialect in a sub-area and group language for a social group of a sub-area, to style for each individual of a group. A speaker's attitude and the psychological distance between the speaker and the listener can be manifested and manipulated by utilizing varieties of each level listed above.

## 1. THE GENERAL PATTERN OF DIALECTAL DIFFERENCES

First, an overview of the situation of Japanese geographical dialects will be given. The dialectal distribution of Japanese is typically shown in the many maps of the "Linguistic Atlas of Japan" published in the 1960s (NLRI 1966).

According to one set of statistics based on 82 selected maps of the Atlas, prefectures near Tokyo use more standard Japanese, and prefectures at both ends of the Japanese Islands use less standard Japanese. It clearly shows that average ratios of standard Japanese forms are in inverse correlation to geographical distance from Tokyo. The

average ratio of the most standardized prefecture was about 60%, the least being less than 10%, overall average for the whole country being 37%.

The use of these same 82 words by some 3,000 middle-high school pupils all over Japan was investigated in 1990s. This time the average ratio of language standardization was over 80%. Even the least standardized prefecture of in this survey was more standardized than the most standardized prefecture of the Atlas data.

These statistics clearly show that geographical dialectal differences in Japanese are now fading away among younger people (Inoue 1997.12b). To add to this, young Japanese people use less gender different terms and less honorifics. To sum up, young people are undergoing a simplification of language use (Inoue 1998.1).

## **2. REAL TIME SURVEYS OF LANGUAGE STANDARDIZATION IN JAPAN**

The process of language standardization can be more appropriately observed through REAL TIME surveys conducted in the same community several decades apart. The results of three large surveys repeated at twenty year intervals in Tsuruoka city in Northern Japan show that standardization of pronunciation of segmental phonetic items has almost completed over the past one hundred years (Inoue 1997.12b). However, standardization of pitch accent was found to lag behind, perhaps because accent is not represented in written Japanese. Standardization of grammatical forms proceeds at even a slower rate.

Standardization of honorifics is least achieved by dialect speakers perhaps because this requires both knowledge of linguistic forms and the proper application of these forms according to the situation. The result of a survey in a village nearby Tsuruoka city showed that the standard use of honorifics was spreading only among young speakers who work in the city. The older farmers of the village still use simple, older dialectal honorifics.

## **3. NEW DIALECT**

Next, the significance of "new dialect" will be discussed within the context of Japanese dialectology. This will show that the trend towards standardization is not the sole active process in Japanese today.

### **3.1. CHARACTERISTICS OF NEW DIALECT**

As has been shown above, fast and steady standardization of language is in progress in Japan today. But in spite of standardization, Japanese dialects are still vigorous and have the power to create new forms, or "new dialect".

"New dialect" forms in Japanese dialectology are identified as meeting the following three conditions (Inoue 1986.4, 1986.6):

1. more users are found among younger people than among older people,
2. users themselves know that the forms are informal or non-standard,
3. forms are different from those of the standard (or common) language.

New dialect forms can be distinguished from fad words, slang, or jargon, because the former are not ephemeral. New dialect forms are constantly spreading as realizations of language change in progress. Thus new dialect may be interpreted theoretically as a typical case of linguistic change from below (Labov 1966), that is, normal, usual linguistic change.

To see if a linguistic form is a new dialect form, it is necessary to investigate at least two age-groups (young and old). Style shift is another important cue in identifying new dialect forms. There are several techniques for grasping style shift. Labov's method of using different methods of questioning is inspiring (Labov 1966). In the study of new dialect in Japan, a simplified method was attempted by using only two situations (Inoue 1983.3). These were an informal daily conversation and a formal, imaginary situation in which one is speaking with an announcer on a TV program.

Studies of "new dialect" show that the trend of standardization is not the sole active process in Japanese today, and that Japanese dialects still have the power to reveal linguistic changes in progress.

### 3.2. TOKYO NEW DIALECT

In the early reports of "new dialect" in Japan, the area around Tokyo seemed to be blank. Language used in Tokyo was usually considered standard. But actually, if we apply the same research procedures in Tokyo, phenomena very similar to new dialect appear (Inoue 1983.12). These can be called "Tokyo New Dialect forms".

Many dialectal grammatical forms imported from dialect-speaking areas north of Tokyo are actually used by young Tokyoites. The diffusion process of some of these forms has been ascertained by surveys depicting geographical differences and age differences at the same time (Inoue 1990.12, 1991.3, 1991.7, 1993.2).

The relation between informal speech of Tokyo and dialects outside of Tokyo has been studied using 'glottograms' which are maps showing geographical differences on one axis and age differences on the other axis. Surveys using this method have been carried out in the northern and central parts of Japan, including Tokyo. Many new forms now prevalent in Tokyo were found to have originated in the suburbs of Tokyo and surrounding prefectures. These examples of linguistic diffusion from outside of Tokyo to inside Tokyo show that there are linguistic continuities between Tokyo and other areas. The language of Tokyo has been treated completely differently because Tokyo is the center of the standard language. However these actual changes show that there is an overlap of lan-

guage between Tokyo and other areas.

Examples of Tokyo new dialect forms include: *uzattai* 'unpleasant', *mitaku* 'like ...', *chigakatta* 'was different', *ikunai* 'not good', *chitta* 'has done', *jan* 'isn't it', and *zurukomi* 'wedging in'. *Kire-nai* 'can not wear', *tabere-nai* 'can not eat' (originally *kirare-nai*, *taberare-nai*) are other examples in the direction of non-standardization. These "ra-deletion" forms reflect a long-term change of the Japanese language, and are now widely discussed in Japan. Many older people dislike and criticize these new expressions, but these so-called corrupt Japanese expressions are steadily spreading among the younger generation in Tokyo (Inoue 1998.1). The glottogram shows that these "corrupt" forms are also diffusing into the country areas north of Tokyo.

In one study of the Tokyo new dialect, it was ascertained that students with different psychological traits and different social characteristics use different degrees of new expressions of language (Inoue 1986.6). The psychological background of the use of new dialect needs to be studied against the theoretical background of solidarity vs. power. Intellectual and emotional factors of language use are also key-factors of analysis.

### 3.3. THE UMBRELLA MODEL OF NEW DIALECT DIFFUSION

On the basis of national survey data of new dialect diffusion, a model in the form of an umbrella has been proposed in order to explain the dual role of Tokyo as a receiver and a sender of new linguistic expressions, as shown in *Figure 1* (Inoue 1998.1).

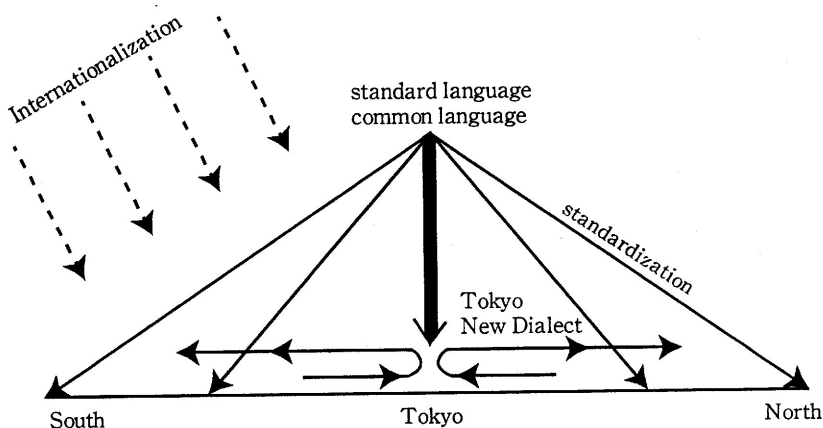


Fig. 1 Umbrella model of linguistic diffusion

Thus, new dialect also has another theoretical significance in the field of sociolinguistics. It has been maintained that there are two types of linguistic change: changes from

below and changes from above. New dialect can be taken as a modern reflection of historical change, especially as “change from below, and downward (or grass-root)”, as opposed to the other type “change from above and upward (authoritarian)” whose typical example is language standardization. The idea of linguistic correlates of society has tended to be too simple. Only two extreme groups have been distinguished in past studies of standardization of the Japanese language; that is, those who use standard Japanese and those who do not. By introducing the idea of new dialect, the complexity of social structure and its relation to language can be grasped more adequately than in past research.

#### 4. CHANGES IN SUPRASEGMENTALS

##### 4.1. EXPERT ACCENT

Turning to phonemic phenomena, pronunciation change in the word accent of loanwords of European origin is now in progress in Tokyo Japanese. Extensive data were acquired from university students, and the relationships between pitch accent usage and speakers' sociopsychological characteristics were ascertained with the use of multivariate analysis (Inoue 1993.12, 1997.12a). The influence of social groups on linguistic change was observed in this area too.

Some examples are as follows: speakers who “like cars and motorbikes” use more flat accent in words like *baiku* (from English 'motorbike' but with a slightly different meaning), *hoïru* (from English 'wheel'), *mafuraa* (from English 'muffler') than those who are indifferent towards vehicles.

The flattening of pitch accent is a long historical trend in the Japanese language. For younger speakers of Japanese the flat unmarked accent symbolically shows that they do not consider the loanwords as “foreign” but as familiar to them. Words familiar to speakers are generally found to proceed faster in linguistic change. Social groups are also influential in the adoption of new forms. In other words, small interest groups and spontaneously-formed groups are sometimes essential for the adoption of newer linguistic forms. Linguistic phenomenon, as a result, functions as a symbol of group identity.

##### 4.2. TWO NEW TYPES OF INTONATION

Recently two types of intonation have appeared among young speakers in Japan (Inoue 1998.3). Young female speakers in Tokyo began using rise-fall intonation at the end of clauses in the 1970's, and this usage is still spreading among younger people. This is sometimes called “end-rising intonation” (or “shiriagari intonation”).

Another intonation pattern began spreading among young female speakers in the

1990's: the rising intonation applied to a word in the middle of a sentence. This was named "half question" intonation.

The acoustic realization and the conversational function of the Japanese "half question" are quite similar to the "Australian questioning intonation", "High Rising Terminal Contour (HRT)" in New Zealand, and the "Uptalk" originating from "Valley Girl Talk" of the United States.

If this intonation pattern was borrowed from the English language, then it is a rare case of global dissemination of a suprasegmental phenomenon.

These new types of intonation are interpreted as new discourse techniques for keeping one's turn in conversation, or drawing attention to one's utterance. These intonation patterns thus have a definite function for conversation in Japanese. They not only keep one's turn of speaking but also attract the interlocutor's attention.

The use of the new intonation patterns can also signify group identity. Those who accept these new linguistic customs are considered to belong to an intimate in-group.

## 5. INTERNATIONALIZATION

The Japanese language as a whole shows internationalization or westernization in several spheres. Numerous examples can be given of words borrowed from the English language and used in Japanese.

A recent nation-wide survey of lexical and grammatical items showed the wide use of words borrowed from English especially among young Japanese speakers.

The degree of knowledge of the English language has become greater among young Japanese people. Frequent use of English words in Japanese sentences has the function of distancing the speaker from the listener, especially when the listener is an old person who is not very familiar with English loanwords.

## 6. HIGH AND LOW OR DISTANT AND NEAR

The recent linguistic changes in Japanese discussed above show that the language has definite social functions. The linguistic differences are socially treated unequally. Positioning the variations in terms of a HIGH and LOW scale as is used in the study of diglossia can be widened and applied to other variations.

In order to distance oneself from the interlocutor, the HIGH varieties of English loanwords, standard language, non in-group expressions and honorific expressions can be utilized; while the LOW varieties of the mother tongue, dialect, in-group expressions and non-honorifics are used to express solidarity between the interlocutors. Many forms of linguistic variation can thus be explained by the same principle of showing psychological

distance of distant and near utilizing the varieties of HIGH and LOW.

This kind of theoretically integrated interpretation of linguistic variation can actually be corroborated by actual surveys of the Japanese language.

## 7. COMMON PRINCIPLES

In conclusion, the Japanese language is experiencing a period of great change at the end of 20th century, or rather at the end of the second millennium. The most significant trend is that variety in the Japanese language has changed in emphasis from a geographical base to a social one. At the same time, the base of social structure also seems to have changed, from ascribed social status to acquired social status which is clearly reflected in usage of honorifics. Linguistic changes recently observed in Japanese seem to be related to a global changes in social structure.

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