

A JAPANESE ACCENT

Introduction

These notes serve as a *brief* introduction to a Japanese accent of English. I developed the core resources for this presentation for a production of Daniel MacIvor's new play *Arigato Tokyo* for Buddies in Bad Times Theatre (Toronto.) [Resources for that play](#), which are in greater depth than what can be shared in a 15 minute presentation, can be viewed online.

About the Language

Japanese or *Nihongo* [nihŋŋo] is spoken by over 120 million people in both Japan and abroad by immigrants. It is part of the *Japonic* language group, which includes only Japanese and Ryukyuan, spoken on the Ryukyu islands southwest of Japan. Historical linguists cannot agree on relationships to other languages, though some see distant relationships to Korean and Altaic languages, such as Turkic and Mongolic. Though there are dozens of dialects, there is a standard form of Japanese that is accepted as the "official form".

Word Order

Whereas English sentences are generally built with the *Subject – Verb – Object*, Japanese sentences are generally of the *Subject – Object – Verb* order familiar to German speakers and Yoda. Sentence elements are marked by *particles*, such as *wa, ga, no*, etc. that identify their function in the sentence.

Mora-Timed vs. Stress Timed

English has syllables that are emphasized through a system of *stress timing*, while Japanese has moras, each of which is roughly the same length. Generally moras/morae consist of two segments (CV), but can consist of only one, too (V or N). This makes the language very evenly stressed, and moras are emphasized with *pitch-accent* that is part of the word. It may explain why some Japanese NNS of English may be inclined to put the emphasis on the wrong syllable at times.

Generally speaking, there are very few initial consonant clusters in Japanese, all of which involve a combination with /j/ —/kja, tya, nya, hya, mya, rya; kju, nju, hju, mju, rju; kjo, njo, hjo, mjo, rjo/. Note that /sja, etc./ are assimilated as [ɕa], /tja/ as [tɕa], /dja/ as [dɕa], /za/. English consonant clusters often have small vowels inserted between the consonant elements in a Japanese accent, so a word like *strong* might come out as [suɔ̃tɕrŋŋu].

Often /i/ and /u/ are devoiced when between 2 voiceless consonants, as in the first syllable of *hikaku* [çikaku]. Final /u/ in the common words *desu* and *masu* are always devoiced, and generally sound like [des] and [mas].

Writing Systems

There are three writing systems in Japanese; two are phonetic — *hiragana* for native Japanese words and particles, and *katakana* for loan words. The third writing system, *kanji*, or Chinese characters were borrowed initially from the Chinese and adapted to Japanese use.

Oral Posture

The most distinctive feature of Japanese is the generally closed shape of the mouth. A good image to explore is the idea of not wanting to show the inside of the mouth, as it is perceived to be impolite. (Whether that is merely a stereotype, I don't know.) There is little to no lip rounding, and so visualizing the mouth as a slit-style letter box would seem apt. However, it has been noted that even on FLEECE vowels there is very little lip spreading, too. Along with this comes limited jaw movement, so much of the articulation is done inside the mouth by the tongue.

Japanese differs from English in that more of the tongue is used in shaping sounds that are made on or near the alveolar (gum) ridge behind the upper front teeth. This tends to make the tongue feel “flatter” in the mouth rather than “curling” up toward the gum ridge. More of the centre/blade of the tongue is engaged in the action of articulation of / t, d, n, s, z, ʃ, ʒ /. Japanese also lacks labio-dental articulations (i.e. no / f, v / consonants); bilabial fricatives tend to substitute for these, so there may feel like there is a greater fricative sensation in the centre of the lips.

Resonance & Pitch Characteristics

With the mouth more closed, the sensation of vibration in the mouth tends to feel trapped further back in the mouth and neck. This is accentuated for male speakers; there is a strong hyper-masculine stereotype of Japanese male voice, with very low, flat pitch and a swallowed, throaty sound. Female speakers make swing the opposite way, tending toward stereotypes of hyper-femininity, with breathiness, high pitched “head tone” and much greater inflectional range. Women are much more likely to accentuate pitch-accent in Japanese words.

Pitch Accent on Words

Due to its limited palette of moras in Japanese, words can be identical, having the same phonemes but being differentiated by pitch (high or low) on “accented” syllables.

Wikipedia features a great audio sample demonstrating 5 such minimal pairs.

hàshi chopsticks, *hashì* bridge, *hashi* edge

ìma now, *imà* living-room

kàki oyster, *kakì* fence, *kaki* persimmon

sàke salmon, *sake* alcohol

nìhon two sticks of, *Nihòn* Japan

Though this is a feature of Japanese, there seems to be little cross-over to a Japanese accent of English, except when speakers use Japanese words within their English speech.

Inflection

Japanese sentence inflection (the melody across the entire sentence) is quite similar to English; questions are made in a similar manner, for instance, with a rise at the end of the phrase. Generally speaking, inflection is not a significant trait of a Japanese accent of English.

Consonant Changes

There are 4 Groups of sounds that I want to focus on for this presentation

1. R and L

Japanese does not have /l/ in its inventory of consonants, and /r/ is articulated with a tap articulation that is sometimes more central and sometimes more lateral, so it may sound to western ears as alternating between a tapped /r/ and a tapped /l/, especially before /o/.

2. Laminalized Consonants

/t, d, n/ are laminal and dentalized so that the blade of the tongue contacts the back of the upper teeth and the front part of the alveolar ridge. /s z/ are laminal alveolar. However, before /i/, these sounds are alveolo-palatal ([tɕ, (d)ʑ, nʲ, ɕ, (d)ʑ]) and before /u/ they are alveolar ([ts (d)z n s (d)z]). After a pause, /z/ is pronounced [dʑ].

3. Nasals

Initially, there is a contrast between /n/ and /m/. Finally, all nasals. Before other consonants, the nasal assimilates with the following consonant's place so we get [mp, mb], [nt, nd], [ŋk, ŋg]. Nasals before fricatives or another vowel are realized as nasalized vowels.

4. Labialized Consonants

/f, v/ do not exist in Japanese and are replaced with [ɸ, β]—the labio-dental articulation switches to a bilabial one. /w/ is articulated with no lip-spreading, often with more of a vowel-like quality [ɰ] or [ɰ̥].

Vowel Changes

a — intermediate "a" vowel

i — tight, substitutes for KIT, no spreading

u — spread version of u, substitutes for foot;

liquid u used after alveolars (e.g. news: [njuuz])

e — more close than ε, not a diphthong

ɔ — open version of o, less rounded; not a diphthong

For more a more detailed breakdown (with practice sentences and accompanying audio) of all the lexical sets of English, see my [Japanese Features](#) handout at <http://goo.gl/HZ4IA>.

Recommended Resources

Learning some very basic Japanese can be extremely helpful. *Language Innovations*, an online language training company, began with [JapanesePod101.com](#), a very helpful podcast based training system. Highly recommended; though some components are for pay only, they have much that can be explored for free, including Absolute Beginner Audio and Video lessons.

Wikipedia's entries for [Japanese Language](#) and [Japanese Phonology](#) are very helpful. The article on [Pitch Accent](#), and [accompanying audio](#) (ogg) are exemplary.

Samples

The [samples I gathered for Arigato Tokyo](#) include materials from IDEA, the Speech Accent Archive, Norio Ota's Japanese 1000 course at York University, and from YouTube.