

The Common Features Among ‘Japanese Englishes’

Nozomi Kato

Reitaku University

Nozomi.Kato@gmail.com

Abstract

This study investigates the common features among Japanese accented Englishes, focusing on Englishes spoken by Ibaraki region dialect speakers and by other region dialect speakers. The commonalities are found in unclear pronunciations of vowels: /ə/ and /ɪ/ and flat intonation. The differences are also found in rising tone; Ibaraki dialect speakers tend to produce unnatural rising tones, whereas other dialect speakers tend to produce flat intonation as a whole.

Keywords

World Englishes, Japanese English, English Phonetics.

Introduction

It is not easy to define the features of Japanese English because the concept of Japanese English has not yet been widely understood or accepted. One of the problems in defining the features of Japanese English is the possibility of the existence of varieties of Japanese Englishes according to the local areas even within Japan. For example, Japanese English spoken in Osaka may be different to some extent from that of Tokyo. If so, it may be impossible to establish Japanese English or it is necessary at least to figure out the common features among Japanese Englishes. This pilot study investigates the latter possibility: the common features among Japanese Englishes if they exist. Another concern about Japanese English is the difference between Japanese and English language use caused by gender. Female language is somewhat different from male language in both English and Japanese context, but its ratio may be different.

1 Research Questions

The following questions are formulated to examine the common features among Japanese Englishes mentioned above.

Q1. Is there any establish pattern of sound system in Japanese localized English

(Japanese English)?

- Q2. What are the features of Japanese English if it exists (both segmental and suprasegmental features)?
- Q3. Is there any difference in Japanese English according to local area and gender?

2 Method

2.1 Participants

To discover the sounds of Japanese English, various participants were selected. Their ages were various. However, all the participants were advanced learners of English in order to avoid results influenced by pronunciations not caused by localization but by the process of interlanguage between Japanese and English languages. There were four learners from Ibaraki Prefecture, Japan and four from other prefectures in Japan so that this examination might find the effect of Ibaraki dialect. Investigation of only Ibaraki dialect may not specify common features of Japanese English as a whole, yet it is useful to know at least there is a difference in English pronunciation between areas in Japan. Four participants were male and other four were female.

In addition to the participants above, a graduate student majoring in English language teaching was the rater of the recorded pronunciations.

Table 1 in the following page is the detail data of the participants.

Table 1: Participants

P	S	Age	Experience Abroad	Native Prefecture
A	M	26	Utah, 5 (18-19, 22-26)	Ibaraki
B	M	23	Washington, 1 (21-22)	Ibaraki
C	F	49	Utah, 1 (47-48)	Ibaraki
D	F	49	Utah, 3 (35-37, 40-41)	Ibaraki
E	M	27	Hawaii, 4 (23-26)	Toyama
F	M	23	California, 2 (19-21)	Chiba
G	F	26	Washington D.C., 1.5 (22-24)	Osaka
H	F	24	Hawaii, 5 (18-23)	Chiba
R	M	30	Sydney, 2 (24-26)	Niigata

Note:

P: Participants

R: Rater

A-H: Identifications of the participants

S: Sex

The number after the name of city/state: the years the participants spent abroad

The number in the brackets: the ages of the participants living abroad

2.2 Material

The material for the participants to read and record was taken from Shimaoka (2004, p.172). The reason for this selection is that it has evaluation criteria to assess the pronunciations of the participants. It has American native speaker's model in accompanying CD and descriptions of segmental features with IPA(International Phonetic Alphabet) and suprasegmental features: rhythm, stress, stress shift and linking (pp.174-188). The data recorded was analyzed according to the criteria and the model.

2.3 Procedure

Eight selected Japanese learners of English were to read aloud the prepared passage and then their sounds were recorded. After the data collection, their pronunciations were analyzed both in segmental and suprasegmental features by a rater, a graduate student majoring in English education.

3 Results

The data was analyzed mainly in the following five categories.

1. Segmental features
 - (1) Vowels

(2) Consonants

2. Suprasegmental features
 - (1) Rhythm
 - (2) Intonation
 - (3) Linking

3.1 Segmental Features

The assessment of segmental features is shown in the Table 2. The rater chose all the sounds of vowels and consonants that seemed deviated from GA (General American) sounds according to the phonetic transcriptions and auditory model of Shimaoka (2004).

As Table 2 indicates, only a few segmentals were considered to be deviated from GA sounds. Participants B and C especially show no consonants sounds that are clearly deviated from GA sounds.

However, all the participants had one or two unclear vowel sounds even though they were all advanced learners of English having spent longer than at least one year and having had sufficient daily exposure to native speakers' English sounds.

Table 2 Deviation from GA (Segmentals)

P	Deviated vowels	Deviated consonants
A	/ə/	/r/
B	/ɪ/, /ə/	+
C	/ɪ/, /ə/	+
D	/ə/	/ɪ/, /r/
E	/ɪ/, /ə/	/ɪ/, /r/
F	/ɪ/	/ɪ/
G	/ɪ/, /ə/	/s/
H	/ɪ/	/ɪ/

Notes:

GA: General American

P: Participants

A-H: Identifications of the participants

+: clearly pronounced as a whole

IPA: specifying the vowels and consonants that were pronounced deviated from GA sounds

According to this result, the following segmentals seem to be the elements that either Japanese learners of English are poor at producing or they do not much care whether they do not pronounce properly:

/ɪ/, /ə/, /r/, /ɪ/

Though it depends on the definition of Japanese English, we may be able to call them the features of Japanese English.

3.2 Suprasegmental Features

The results of deviated suprasegmental features are shown in Table 3. The rater again chose the features that seemed deviated from GA sounds

according to the phonetic transcriptions and auditory model of Shimaoka (2004).

Table 2 Deviation from GA (Suprasegmentals)

P	Rhythm	Intonation	Linking
A	+	Rises tend to be flat.	+
B	Every syllable is stressed	Rises tend to be flat or fall.	-
C	- (unstressed)	Rises tend to be flat	-
D	Little difference between stressed and unstressed positions	Very different from native model	+
E	+	A little flat	+
F	+	Flat	-
G	+	+	+
H	+	A little flat	

Notes:

GA: General American

P: Participants

A-H: Identifications of the participants

+: clearly pronounced as a whole in the box

-: not clearly pronounced as a whole

All the participants who are not from Ibaraki prefecture (E,F,G and H) were judged fairly well in their rhythm, whereas the participants from Ibaraki prefecture (B,C,D) had somewhat unique ways to produce rhythm.

Linking had not much difference between Ibaraki and non-Ibaraki participants. On the other hand, intonation had some different tendency between them.

As a whole, the participants tend to have a few common segmental accents and flat intonation, but most of them are good at producing native-like rhythm.

4 Discussion

4.1 Segmental Features

There was not much difference between Ibaraki and non-Ibaraki participants in segmental features. There was also little difference between male (A,B,E,F) and female (C,D,G,H) participants. The features most commonly found among the participants' pronunciations were /ɪ/ and /ə/ (both 6 out of 8 participants). Those are the two most unstressed syllables (Swan, 1992). Unnatural unstressed syllable sounds may be one of the main features that Japanese learners of English tend to localize as Japanese English.

4.2 Suprasegmental Features

Among suprasegmental features, there were two features that may be different according to native prefecture. Those features were intonation and stress. Among four Ibaraki participants, A, B, and C had similar tendency. They were not good at producing rising tone though they could produce relatively better falling tone. On the other hand, three non-Ibaraki participants (E,F and H) tended to produce flat intonation constantly. Ibaraki participants (A,B,C,D) seemed to be poor at producing native-like stress and rhythms, while all of non-Ibaraki participants (E,F,G,H) were good at producing them.

There was no difference between Ibaraki and non-Ibaraki participants in linking skill. There was also no significant difference between male and female participants in any suprasegmental features.

4.3 Implications for the concept of Japanese English

This examination shows that there are a few common localized segmental features found in the Japanese advanced learners pronunciations. It also explains that intonation may be various according to other factors such as native prefectures in Japan.

4.3.1 Research Question 1

Is there an established pattern of sound system in Japanese localized English (Japanese English)? — Q1. There was no clear answer to this question because of two reasons. Firstly, Japanese common accents were not many enough in the data and it was still not clear if Japanese learners really could not or did not want to change those accents. In other words, it was not clear whether or not they were in the process of interlanguage. Secondly, there were very few commonly deviated suprasegmentals among the Japanese learners; linking was totally various and intonation seemed to depend on the area in Japan.

4.3.2 Research Question 2

What are the features of Japanese English if it exists (both segmental and suprasegmental features)? — Q2. There was also not clear answer to this question because Q2 depends on Q1. If question 1 was affirmatively answered, the followings would be the features of Japanese English found so far in this study.

1. /ə/ and /ɪ/ are commonly unclear.
2. Flat intonation is commonly found.

4.3.3 Research Question 3

Research question 3 can be answered as follows:

3. There is no outstanding difference according to sex.
4. The speakers in Ibaraki tend to produce unnatural rising tones and flat intonation. On the other hand, non-Ibaraki participants tend to produce flat intonation as a whole.

Unlike Jolly (2000), it is clear that vowels are more difficult than consonants for the advanced Japanese learners of English to produce.

5 References

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