

SOME NOTES ON JAPANESE AND ENGLISH INTONATION

Akihiro FUJII

Preface

It is often said that situation or context is very important in language teaching. However, not only is it impossible to be certain about the intonation pattern of an utterance unless a situation is provided for it, but it is equally impossible to be certain about the situation for an utterance unless the intonation pattern for it is given. Intonation is inseparable from meaning. Intonation patterns must be taught right from the beginning of teaching a foreign language.

In Japan, however, the teachers of English seem not to have done full justice to the teaching of intonation. It is true that Japanese teachers of English have recently come to realize the importance of teaching the prosodic features of English, because native speakers, tape recorders or language laboratories are easily available to English teaching in Japan. But intonation is still apt to be disregarded in Japan.

For English intonation to be taught properly, teachers of English must understand the general intonation contours of Japanese as well as of English, and compare the differences. The first half of this paper, therefore, describes the typical intonation patterns of Japanese sentences spoken in typical situations, as a sort of memorandum on Japanese intonation, which must be known even by Japanese teachers of English. The second half is to introduce an experiment, though it might be subjective, whose result shows that there is a similarity of

intonation patterns in some sorts of Japanese and English sentences with the similar meaning.

I

According to O'Connor and Arnold, there are three roles of intonation: (i) the division of language utterances into grammatically relevant word groups, (ii) the use of different tunes, different patterns of pitch, for grammatical purposes, (iii) expressing the speaker's attitudes, at the moment of speaking, to the situation in which he is placed. (O'Connor and Arnold, p. 4)

Apart from the first two clearly grammatical roles of intonation, the third one is very important, because it provides important information which is not contained in any of the other features of utterances. So intonation may be said to be the 'psychological' pitch which one uses while one speaks. One and the same expression might leave quite different impressions according to the type of intonation that may be superimposed on it.

For example, I, a speaker of Japanese, find myself superimposing several intonation patterns on the nasal [m] and its variants.

'm (˘) or ˘m (˘)	:	simple 'yes'.
'm (ˆ)	:	What?
'm ˘m ˘m (ˆ ˆ ˆ)	:	Oh, I see.
˘m [m :] (ˆ)	:	Let me see, well.
'm [m :] (˘)	:	Really?
˘m [m : m] (ˆ ˆ)	:	No.

As shown above, intonations, which are more or less similar to the English, also take place in Japanese. Intonation has an emotional function and reflects the speaker's feelings or attitudes. I admit that

it is quite difficult to categorize tone-group according to emotional meaning. So, at first, I will mention only the typical intonational patterns with typical examples.

II

The most fundamental intonation pattern in Japanese is a falling pattern. The following statements are uttered with a low fall pattern.

Korewa hondesu. (This is a book.)



Nikake niwa shidesu. (2 times 2 equals 4.)



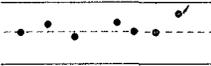
Haruga kita. (Spring has come.)



This pattern communicates nothing more than the words indicate, and sounds complete. This may be almost the same as that which characterizes similar expressions in English.

If a low-rise pattern is used in such examples, the speaker is appealing to the listener or is requiring the listener's participation in or sympathy with his view or statement. For example,

Korewa hondesu?



would be a reassuring or (in part) a questioning remark.

Just as a statement with a low-rise pattern makes a question in English, the above examples of Japanese may be changed to questions with the superimposition of a low-rise pattern on them. (The kind of formation of questions is often resorted to in various languages.)

In order to form a question in Japanese, a question particle *ka* is

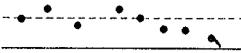
generally used. This kind of question form with *ka* can be pronounced with a rising or falling intonation, but gives different implications.

(In informal conversation, *ka* is frequently dispensed with.) The examples can be interpreted as follows :

Korewa hondesuka ? (Is this a book ? ; normal question)



Korewa hondesuka ? (This is a book, isn't it? I thought that
it was an album.)



As for commands and requests, there are also similar phenomena observable in both Japanese and English. When uttered with a falling intonation, they sound informal, frank or even brusque. If such a command is articulated loudly with this tone, it gives an impression of anger and seriousness, and usually implies that the speaker is somehow in a superior position to the listener.

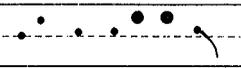
Soreo ttotte kudasai (Hand it to me.)



On the other hand, the rising intonation would sound less informal or would give an impression of courteous request. (In Japanese, an expression of courteousness would be conveyed by the use of honorifics.)

With reference to exclamatory expressions, the most typical intonation pattern is a high-fall.

Totemo subarashi (How wonderful !)

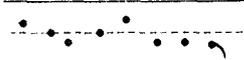


Here also English expression as above ends with a similar tone.

III

Next I will refer to the intonation pattern of WH-questions. Usually a falling pattern is used in a normal WH-question, calling for information. A low-fall pattern sounds serious and urgent, whereas a high-fall pattern sounds brisk and friendly.

Dokoe yukimasuka ? (Where do you go ?)

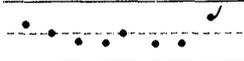


Karewa dare ? (Who is he ?)



A low-rise pattern would impart an effect of curiosity or cordiality :

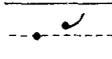
Dokoni arimasuka ? (Where is it ?)



When the nucleus is put on the interrogative word, the effect may be either of repeating the listener's question or of asking for information to be repeated :

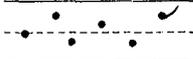
"Namaewa Ken desu." (The name is Ken.)

"Nani ?" (What ?)



If a rise-fall pattern is superimposed on an interrogative word, it is suggestive of intensified feelings :

Nanio kattate ? (What on earth did you buy ?)



Though either a falling or rising intonation may be added to the final words of those sentences, the latter gives an impression of more intensified curiosity.

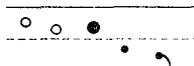
If a question is uttered with a high-fall intonation with a rapid "decrecendo" of voice added to the interrogative word, it gives an im-

pression of accusation, even though it is uttered politely with the use of honorifics.

Nanio shiteruno ? (What are you doing ?)



Naze kattano ? (Why did you buy ?)



The following example sentences will summarize the points made in this section :

Nanio tabeteruno ? (What are you eating ?) normal col-



orless question

Nanio tabeteruno ? cordial question, sometimes spoken



with curiosity

Na(a)nio tabeteruno ? intently curious question



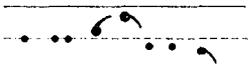
The intonation of the final part of the sentence betrays a different degree of interest on the part of the speaker according to a falling tone or a rising tone. If an interrogative word, esp. *—ni—*, is stressed very much and a sentence ending ends with a falling tone, it would suggest that the speaker has lost his temper :

Nanio tabeteruno ?



When a rise-fall pattern is superimposed on the element *—tabe—*, the utterance might be taken as a sarcastic comment on the behaviour of the person addressed :

Nanio tabeteruno ?



Before I go further, I would like to mention briefly alternative questions.

IV

Just as in English, Japanese alternative questions consist of two or more yes-no questions. In English it is generally said that every contrasting alternative is superimposed with a rising tone, except the last one which receives a falling intonation. In Japanese, alternative questions do not always seem to receive the same intonation. Some say (Ikeura, pp. 34-35) that the intonation patterns of alternative questions depend on whether interrogative particles, *ka*, *no*, *ne*, are used or not.

- (1) Dochira ringo mikan? (Which do you want, an apple or an orange?)

 (2) Dochira ringone mikanne?


Example (2) gives an impression that the speaker presupposes that the addressee will eat one of them (i. e., either the apple or the orange) and that he wants to make sure which of the two the hearer eats). We acknowledge the change of intonation according to whether interrogative words are used or not, but what is more important is whether the verb or the verb + interrogative word is inserted or omitted in the body of a question.

- (3) Dochirao taberuno, ringo mikan?

 (Which do you want to eat, an apple or an orange?)

By the end of the body or the question in (3), the hearer can understand that he is being asked a question because of the existence of

the interrogative particle *no*, but, if the verb part is omitted as in (1), the speaker has to ask the hearer by superimposing a rising intonation on each alternative so that the sentence may become a question.

Characteristic features of intonation in alternative questions will appear at three points : the end of the question body, the first alternative, and the last alternative. Focussing on these three points, what I can say about Japanese alternative questions is, (1) a fall-fall-fall pattern is the most common intonation in them, (2) when the question includes something more in the form of an alternative which is not actually uttered, it takes a fall-rise-rise pattern in Japanese as in English.

V

I have mentioned the outline of typical Japanese intonation patterns with typical sentences. The next thing that I would like to do is to focus on the same types, at least syntactically, of Japanese and English sentences and look at them in more detail to find out any characteristic features they may have. The sentence I picked out was 'Nanio shiteru no' (What are you doing?)

What are you doing ?

nanio (antawa) shiteru no

At first I set up 5 situations :

Situation 1 : The speaker is simply asking for a piece of information from the hearer with a normal intonation pattern.

Situation 2 : Same as above, but on this occasion the speaker is endeavouring to be somewhat endearing. We might imagine ourselves using this type of articulation to a little child who needs delicate handling.

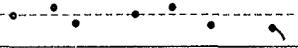
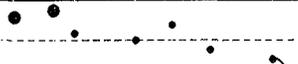
Situation 3 : The speaker is very curious to know what the hearer is doing.

Situation 4 : He is angry at what the hearer is doing and has lost his temper. This utterance is anything but a simple question of an information-seeking type as we see it in situation 1 or 2.

Situation 5 : The speaker is being sarcastic. The situation is different from 1, 2 or 3 but rather close attitudinally to 4. But the difference will be that in situation 4 the speaker is behaving less rudely than in 5.

Taking each situation into consideration, I read the Japanese WH-question and wrote down each intonation pattern which represented the situation most appropriately. (I discussed it with Japanese people, and we concluded that there is no conspicuous difference between the intonation patterns representing situation 2 and 3.)

NANIO SHITERU NO

Sit. 1		(a gradual fall)
Sit. 2		(a slight rise at the end)
Sit. 3		(a gentle convex intonation on <i>nani</i>)
Sit. 4		(stressed <i>nani</i> plus a rapid glide down)
Sit. 5		(a convex intonation on <i>te</i> with a raised pitch)

The sentence 'what are you doing' was recorded using each intonation pattern (as above) without changing the sound quality. Then the explanation about each situation was given to 7 native speakers of English from Stockton(UK), Norwich(UK), Wigan(UK), Liverpool(UK),

Preston(UK), Maryland(USA) and Co Armagh(Ireland). They were asked which type of intonation pattern for 'what are you doing?' represents each situation most appropriately. They answered as follows :

Sit. in Japanese	What are you doing	Sit. 1	Sit. 2	Sit. 3	Sit. 4	Sit. 5
3		1*	1	4	0	1
1		6	1	0	0	0
4		0	0	1	6	0
5		0	1	1	0	5
2		0	4	1	1	1

(*each number shows how many students think that the intonation pattern of the left represents the situation listed above.)

Of course it had been expected that completely unanimous agreement between Japanese and English intonations was impossible. But, as far as this question is concerned, if the intonations (i.e., those superimposed on the Japanese equivalent of 'what are you doing'), which express the situations especially 1, 4 and 5, are similarly employed in the English question, (which is supposed to represent the same situations respectively,) they do not give wrong impressions to native speakers of English.

This sounds quite interesting, both because Japanese and English are quite different languages lexically, structurally and phonologically, and because Japanese people usually do not express their emotion so conspicuously as Europeans.

Concluding Remarks

I have discussed general features of intonation patterns of Japanese sentences, sometimes comparing them with those of English. This was quite difficult for me to do, because this kind of study could reduce itself to subjective impressions, and because there have been few studies done on Japanese intonation.

As far as Japanese intonation is concerned, what I have described is confined to a few typical expressions and I am afraid that there might be other kinds of intonation patterns, resulting in other interpretations. One of the things that I noticed in the course of this tentative sketch of intonation is that there appeared in many cases a similarity in the way intonation curves are employed in Japanese and English. I may conjecture that there exists, to some extent, universality of intonation patterns among natural languages, because there is a universality of syntax among them. This does not imply that the same kind of expressions in many languages sound alike, but that some languages seem to have more or less common psychological use of intonation.

References

- Abe, I. : 'Intonational Patterns of English and Japanese', *Word*, Vol. 11, 1955, pp. 386-398
- Abercrombie D : *Elements of General Phonetics*, Edinburgh U. P., 1975.
- Bloch, B. : 'Studies in Colloquial Japanese IV : Phonemics', *Language*, Vol. 26, 1950, pp. 86-125.
- Gimson, A. C. : *An Introduction to the Pronunciation of English*, Edward Arnold, 1972.

- Ikeura, S. : 'Comparison of English and Japanese Intonation — Alternative Questions —' *Bulletin of Fukuoka University of Education*, Vol.17, 3, 1967.
- Ishibashi, K. (ed.) : *Dictionary of English Linguistics*, Seibido, Tokyo, 1972.
- NHK : *Nippongo Hatsuon Accent Jiten*, 1972.
- O'Connor, J. D. : *Phonetics*, Penguin, 1973.
- O'Connor, J.D. and Arnold, G. F. : *Intonation of Colloquial English*, Longman, 1973.
- Ogura, R. : *Nippon no Mimi*, Iwanami, 1977.
- Shimaoka, H. : 'Nichieigono Ontaikeino Hikaku', *Gogaku Kyoiku*, Tokyo, Nos. 278-279, 1967.
- Wells, J. C. and Colson, G. : *Practical Phonetics*, Pitman, 1971.
- Hockett, C. F. : *A Course in Modern Linguistics*, New York, 1958.