

Shifting to a 2-Pattern Accent System in Tokyo Japanese? The Annoying Accentual Behavior of Surnames

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Abstract

In the Tokyo Japanese **pitch-accent** system, accent on a word or other short phrase (an “accent phrase”) is realized as a steep drop from a high pitch to a low pitch (marked here with an arrow), as in /ma^hkura/ 枕 ‘pillow’ and /u^hci^hwa/ 団扇 ‘fan’. There are words with an accented last syllable, like /takara^h/ 宝 ‘treasure’, but there are also words with no accented syllable, like /sakana/ 魚 ‘fish’. If the final syllable is short and phrase-final, the distinction between final accent and no accent is neutralized; the difference appears only when something like the topic particle /wa/ は follows within the same accent phrase: /takara^hwa/ 宝は versus /sakanawa/ 魚は.

The description above suggests that there are $n+1$ possible accent locations in a word containing n syllables, but this is true only for nouns. The possibilities for verb and adjective forms are very limited. Furthermore, nouns with n syllables are nowhere near evenly distributed among the $n+1$ possibilities. About half are unaccented, and among accented nouns containing at least two moras, the great majority have the default location, i.e., accent on the syllable containing the third mora from the end (the second mora from the end if there are only two moras). Perhaps Tokyo Japanese will eventually develop a simpler accent system, with accented versus unaccented as the only distinction. Japanese surnames are a subclass of nouns, and they already conform to this simple dichotomy. For example, given the surname /fujita/ 藤田, which contains three short syllables, there are only two possibilities: unaccented /fujita/ or accented /fu^hjita/.

Some surnames, though only a small minority, are based on monomorphemic nouns, and these are interesting in terms of accent. The unaccented surname /mori/ 森 corresponds to /mori/ ‘forest’, and the initial-accented surname /se^hki/ 関 corresponds to /se^hki/ ‘barrier’. However, the name based on /tani^h/ 谷 ‘valley’ is /ta^hni/, and the name based on /higaši^h/ 東 ‘east’ is /hi^hgaši/. These examples suggest that a surname based on a common noun is unaccented when the related noun is unaccented and accented when the related noun is accented, but that an accented surname has the default accent location regardless of the accent location on the related common noun. Unfortunately, there are obvious exceptions to this generalization, such as the surname 星 /ho^hši/ (cf. unaccented /hoši/ ‘star’) and the surname 原 /hara/ (cf. accented /ha^hra/ ‘field’). I will report on whether the proposed generalization holds up as a statistical tendency, and I will also consider how Tokyo speakers treat pseudonyms based on monomorphemic common nouns, such as the surnames adopted by writers and entertainers.

ALL ARE WELCOME

