A quantitative study of the wh prosody/scope correlation in Fukuoka Japanese

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Japanese wh questions have been a topic of interest in syntax-phonology interface research for some time. A particularly interesting case is the Fukuoka dialect. Fukuoka Japanese wh prosody has been described in a series of papers by Kubo (1989 et seq.), based largely on introspective grammaticality judgments (see also Hayata 1985).

According to these descriptions, wh constructions surface with a distinctive “flat high tone” contour. The phonological structure of the wh intonational contour has been analyzed (see especially Kubo 1990, 2005) as a single phonological phrase with the following characteristics:

(a) All lexical pitch accents are deleted inside that phonological phrase
(b) The right edge of the phrase correlates with the semantic scope of the wh element

This phenomenon has interesting implications for models of the syntax-phonology interface. For example, unlike the more widely known case of Tokyo Japanese, Fukuoka wh prosody cannot be viewed as a type of focus prosody.

Because of the potential theoretical interest of Fukuoka wh prosody, as well as the possibility that the Fukuoka dialect is undergoing diachronic change, it is of interest to determine whether the introspection-based generalizations laid out in Kubo’s work can be replicated in an empirical study with linguistically naive, younger speakers.

This talk presents some preliminary results of an empirical study based on data collected from twelve young-adult Fukuoka speakers. Evidence is found for both accent deletion and a prosody/scope correlation, although the results show a certain amount of variation both within and between speakers. Methodological issues in the study of intonational phonology and in the interpretation of data are also addressed.

References


Kubo, Tomoyuki. 1989. *Hukuoka-si hougen no, dare • nani tou no gimonsi o hukumu bun no pitti pataan* [The pitch patterns of sentences containing wh-words in the Fukuoka City dialect]. *Kokugogaku* 156: 1-12.
