

The Effect of Phonetics Factors in Interpretation of Japanese Degree Adverbs

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Abstract : Japanese degree adverbs can be explained in different ways, which is hard for Japanese learners to comprehend. For instance, when 'tyotto' is used as a degree word, it can be interpreted literally or not. In the sentence 'Ano mise, tyotto oishi yo. zehi iku to ii yo.', 'tyotto' can be interpreted as a high degree contextually. Despite pragmatic factors, phonetics factors can also affect the interpretation of such 'tyotto'. Concentrating on the pattern of 'tyotto + adjective', the paper aims to investigate the correlation between the interpretation of 'tyotto' and the phonetic factors in some specific contexts based on a listening experiment via PRAAT. It is also investigated that how the phonetic factors affect the interpretation of high degree adverbs, including 'soutou', 'totemo', 'kanari' and 'sugoku'. In the experiment, Japanese speakers listened to sentences which were composed of degree adverbs and adjectives in different intonations and judged which degree the sentences expressed. Two conclusions can be drawn from the experiment results. Firstly, for adverbs expressing a high degree, in the pattern of 'degree adverb + adjective', either degree adverb or adjective is pronounced in a higher pitch, or both are highly pronounced, a higher degree can be expressed. Besides, with the insertion of geminate consonant and the extension of the vowel, the longer the duration of the degree adverb becomes, the higher degree can be expressed. Secondly, for 'tyotto', which expresses a low degree, the interpretation will be influenced by both phonetic and contextual factors. Phonetically, there are three factors causing 'tyotto' to be interpreted as a common degree or a high degree. The three factors are the high pitch of the modified adjective, the extended silence period of the geminate consonant and the change in the intonations of 'tyotto'. In some contexts just like the comparison sentences, no matter how 'tyotto + adjective' is pronounced, 'tyotto' tends to be interpreted as a low degree literally.

Keywords : contextual interpretation, Japanese degree adverbs, phonetic interpretation, PRAAT

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