A real-time study of standardization of lexical accents in Sapporo Japanese: What can we generalize linguistic change from panel samples?

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Real-time studies of linguistic change are relatively scarce in the framework of sociolinguistics. An absolute majority of past studies are built on the apparent-time construct in which one’s vernacular is hypothesized to be unchangeable once acquired during his or her adolescent years (Labov 1972). More recently, rigorous attempts have been made on the observations of the same individuals over time (i.e., panel sample), and have reached rather conflicting generalizations. Some studies, for example, present the evidence counter to the stability of the vernacular, reporting ”lifespan changes” with restricted numbers of informants (e.g., Sankoff & Blondeau 2007, Kerswill & Williams 2000). Other studies claim that the stability of the vernacular over a lifetime depends on linguistic domains: vocabulary items are most vulnerable, whereas prosody is highly impervious (Chambers 2009). In Japanese sociolinguistic context, however, this latter generalization has recently been amended, in that prosodic variables are highly susceptible to lifespan changes, but segmental sounds are almost immutable over one’s lifetime (Yokoyama & Sanada 2010).

This talk aims to contribute to the resolution of these conflicting views by providing real-time panel samples from Sapporo Japanese, which has undergone a massive degree of standardization. The talk focuses on the prosodic domain (lexical accents), which has been understudied in real-time investigation of linguistic change in the past.

Based on 146 identical sentences read aloud by 40 Sapporo Japanese informants recorded twice in 1990 and 2011, the results demonstrate that among the vast majority of informants, their lexical accents remain stable even after a quarter century passed. The results also show that linguistic constraints continue to exert uniform influences on their idiolects over time, outweighing social factors (e.g., generation, gender, media). I also plan to discuss several ”exceptional” informants with higher degrees of lifespan change towards standard Japanese, referring to language attitudes and ideologies.

Keywords: ”Real-time Panel Study” ”Lexical Accents” ”Japanese”.