

Slips of the Ear in Japanese

The present study deals with slips of the ear, or misperceptions and misunderstandings, observed in casual conversation in Japanese. The goals of this study are twofold. One, comparing slips of the ear in English (Bond 1999), the present study explores universal and language-specific features of slips of the ear. Slips of the ear involve phonological changes or misperceptions but have not got much attention in the literature and comparative studies have not been done. It has not been revealed yet what is universal and what is language-specific in slips of the ear. Two, based on misperceptions affecting /u/, this study claims that /u/ in Japanese is a non-back vowel.

The data were collected from Hobo Nikkan Itoi Shinbun (website). Excluding 10 examples of homophones, 221 examples, i.e. words, phrases, and sentences containing misperceptions, were adopted for this study and analyzed. The following are the misperceptions observed in Japanese.

The majority of the examples contain more than one misperception. 554 misperceived syllables are observed in 221 examples. Among three types of misperceptions, i.e. deletion, insertion, and substitution, substitution is the most common (see (1)) (A). Regarding deletion and insertion, insertion affecting the word-final syllable is more common than insertion affecting the word-initial syllable (B), while deletion does not show such positional difference (see (2)) (C). Stops are most frequently involved in both deletion and insertion (D), which is probably due to a phonetic reason, i.e. length. With respect to substitution, misperceptions affecting only consonants are most frequently observed (see (3)) (E). Presumably, this is also due to a phonetic reason. Among misperceptions affecting only consonants, approximately half of errors affect stops (see (4)) (F), especially velar stops /k/ and /g/ (28 and 10 errors, respectively) (G). Perceptual errors in the manner of articulation are more common than those in the place of articulation (H) and those in voicing (I) (see (5)), which suggests that voicing and place features are more prominent and easier to be perceived than manner features.

Of all vowel misperceptions, approximately three quarters are errors affecting short vowels and a quarter are those affecting long vowels (J) (see (6)), which is due to a phonetic reason, namely length. Non-high vowels /a/ and /aa/ are misperceived less frequently than the other vowels (K). Misperceptions affecting height are more common than those affecting the front-back dimension (L) (see (7)), which indicates that the difference between [front] and [back] is more prominent and easier to be perceived than the difference regarding height.

Among the 12 properties (A - L) introduced above, B, D, E, F, H, and L are observed in the slips of the ear in English as well and C, G, and K are not observed in English and specific to Japanese, whereas A, I, and J are not mentioned in the previous studies. Unlike the property C in Japanese, deletion in English occurs more frequently in the word-final position. With respect to misperceptions affecting only consonants in English, labial and alveolar are the most common place of articulation (cf. G), while front vowels are most frequently misperceived in English (cf. K). Most of the properties above seem to be phonetically motivated.

Although, as mentioned above, errors affecting vowel height are universally most common among vowel misperceptions, /u/ in Japanese is different from the other vowels. As illustrated in (7), /u/ is perceived as /i/ more frequently than as /o/, and the misperception “u → i” is the second most common among all vowel misperceptions in Japanese. Other vowels less frequently trigger errors affecting the front-back dimension (see (8)). It has been agreed in the literature that Japanese /u/ is a back vowel. But, the misperception “u → i” suggests that /u/ is not a back vowel but a non-back vowel. Kubozono (1998: 20-21) also claims that /u/ is a non-back vowel, based on the observation that /u/ can be pronounced as [u] by losing roundness, which is a problematic in terms of markedness. Slips of the ear in Japanese provides another piece of evidence that /u/ is a non-back vowel.

The present study explored slips of the ear in Japanese and discussed what is universal and what is language-specific among misperceptions observed in Japanese. This study revealed a unique property of /u/ regarding misperceptions, which can be supporting evidence for the claim that Japanese /u/ is a non-back vowel. Slips of the ear have not got much attention in the literature and thus far have been studied in only three languages, i.e. English, German, and Japanese. Studies in other languages such as Korean are needed to be done in the future to reveal universal and language-specific features of misperceptions.

(1) Three Types of Misperceptions

deletion	insertion	substitution
49	46	449

(2) Deletion and Insertion

deletion affecting		Insertion affecting	
word-initial σ	word-final σ	word-initial σ	word-final σ
11	10	11	16

(3) Substitution

affecting only Cs	affecting only Vs	affecting σ 's
195	116	138

(4) Consonants

Stops	Fricatives	Approximants	Nasals
90	41	28	36

(5) Most Common Consonant Misperceptions involving Substitution

k → t	m → n	m → b	t → k	n → r	b → m	d → n	g → b	g → k	k → h	z → t	h → k	r → n
9	8	7	6	5	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4

(6) Most Common Vowel Misperceptions involving Substitution

i	ii	e	ee	a	aa	o	oo	u	uu
19	7	22	4	9	6	17	13	23	3

(7) Most Common Vowel Misperceptions involving Substitution

e → i	u → i	u → o	i → e	o → u	oo → o	u → a	a → o	aa → a	oo → o	ii → iN	e → u
8	7	6	5	5	4	4	3	3	3	3	3

(8) Vowel Misperceptions involving the Front-Back Dimension

i → u	e → o	o → e	u → i
3	2	2	7

Appendix: some examples of misperceptions in Japanese

- ogawasaN → obaasaN
- yagai katudoo seNtaa → nagai katuo seNtaa
- kyuu ni kumoQtekita → gyuuniku moQtekita
- yoNmeesama → noNbeesama
- amagu → amaguri
- dare ga mukae ni ikuno → dare gamu kai ni ikuno
- teNziN no mori → peNgiN no mori
- rokuzi goro → noguti goro
- kami nomizo siru → kani no misosiru

Selected References

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