

# Some Intonational Characteristics of Japanese Learners of English

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## 1. Introduction

This paper analyzes the errors of English intonation spoken by Japanese learners and discusses some of their characteristics. The author pointed out in a previous thesis<sup>1</sup> some differences and similarities between Japanese and English intonational systems. It is predicted by contrastive analysis that the differing points of intonation are the Japanese learners' difficulties and the reason for the errors frequently made. This paper will explain whether or not the predicted difficulties appear as errors, and will uncover new difficulties unpredicted by contrastive analysis.

The author restricted Japanese subjects to six southern Okayama dialect speakers in the light of intonational diversities produced by dialectal interference. The six subjects are female first-year college students majoring in English. They were born and brought up in the southern part of Okayama Prefecture: Okayama City and two neighboring counties. They have never lived in any other district in Japan.

The materials read by these subjects are nine different dialogs taken from *The New Intensive Course in English: Elementary Part 1* (English Language Service, Inc., 1978). The Japanese learners' intonation was compared with American English intonation in pre-recorded tapes which accompanied the above text. All intonation contours were perceived by the author's ears, and some of them were analyzed by KYOWA Photo-corder (Rapet RMS-11) for a more accurate and objective understanding of their acoustic features.

## 2. Intonational Characteristics of Japanese Learners of English

The conspicuous characteristics found by the analysis roughly fall into two categories; one is attitudinal and the other, acoustical. The former can be seen in the Japanese learners' English intonation patterns which could change, more or less, the meaning of utterances conveyed by intonation. Acoustical characteristics generally do not change intonational meaning, but make English sound foreign to native speakers' ears.

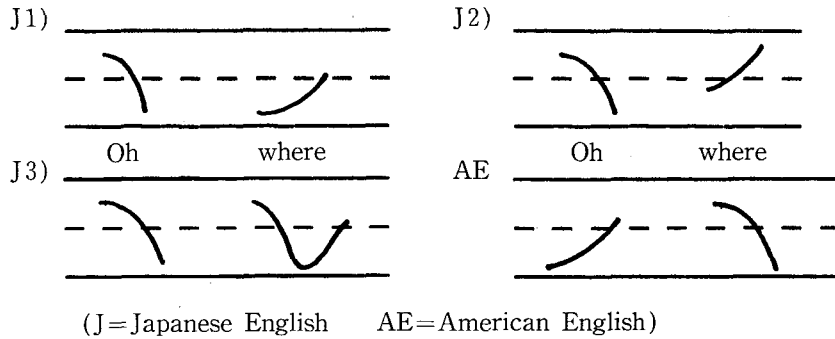
### 2.1 Attitudinal Characteristics

The Japanese learners sometimes use intonation patterns inappropriate for a certain situation. In the following examples, J1), J2) and J3), rising intonation is used where

falling intonation should be used :

Speaker A : Jim's a university student.

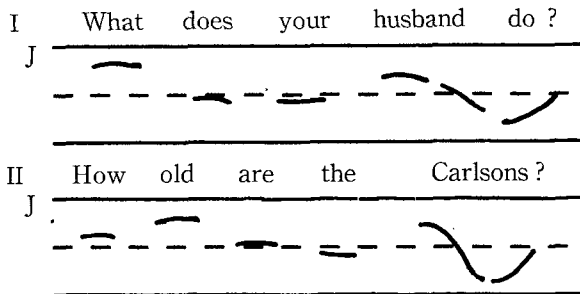
Speaker B: Oh ... where ?



Four students out of six employ rising intonation in this context ; two students use intonation pattern J3).

The most common way of asking wh-questions is falling intonation as in AE ; intonation falls from high to very low pitch.<sup>2</sup> Intonation patterns of cases J1) and J2) imply repeating the listener's question, both of which are not appropriate for this situation. Case J3) is also a wrong contour because this pitch contour is employed in echoed questions with the effect of astonishment.<sup>3</sup>

There can be seen other examples where rising contour is used in wh-questions:



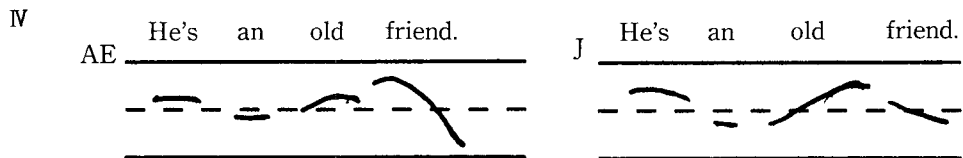
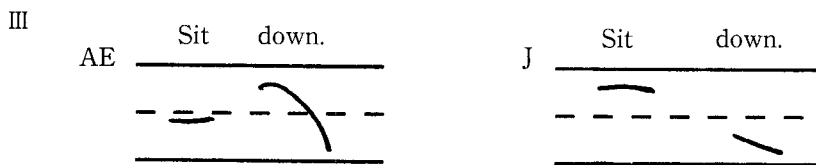
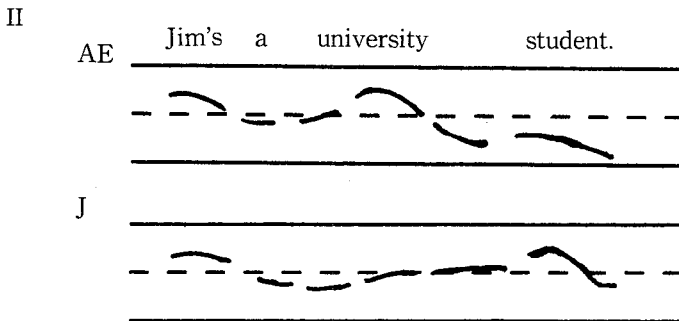
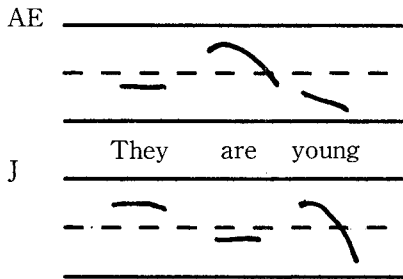
Intonation in example I is a common way of asking questions of young children, or often used for an opening question among adults.<sup>4</sup> Therefore it is another possible pitch pattern, though it is not clear whether or not the Japanese learner intended to distinguish between the two intonation patterns, falling and rising. Example II, on the other hand, is inadequate; this intonation pattern is used in echo questions with astonishment or in questions where there is only one word to be accented.

The number of cases where rising intonation is used in wh-questions is not so small. The author pointed out in a previous thesis that in wh-questions Japanese normally uses rising intonation, but that English uses falling intonation.<sup>5</sup> This difference between English and Japanese intonation could explain that Japanese usage of rising intonation

in wh-questions interferes with English falling intonation in the same situation.

Another noticeable characteristic of intonation is that Japanese learners sometimes put nucleus on the wrong or inappropriate word :

- I Speaker A : How old are the Carlsons?  
 Speaker B : Oh, they're very young.  
 Speaker A : Twenty ?  
 Speaker B : Oh, twenty-three... maybe twenty-four.  
 Speaker A : They *are* young ! ('Are' is italicized to be emphasized in the text.)



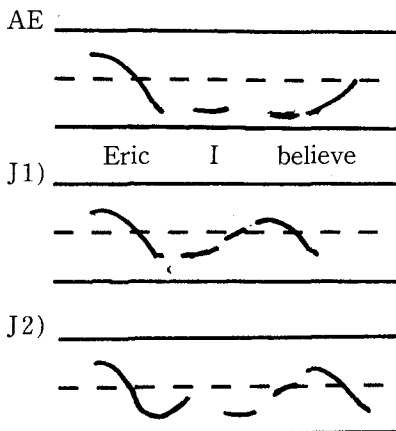
In each example, more than half of the six students place a nucleus on the inappropriate word. The Japanese learners seem to have difficulty in deciding on which element the higher pitch with a stronger stress should be put in noun compounds, verb or

noun phrases, and where the nucleus comes in a sentence according to context. This difficulty was not pointed out by contrastive analysis.

Japanese learners, on the whole, seem to have poor management of a variety of English intonational usage. They have difficulty in expressing the shades of meaning of sentences by using intonation properly according to the situation. Particularly, the Japanese learners do not use rising intonation in declarative sentences to express attitudinal meaning. The following are some of their examples:

I Speaker A : What's her husband's first name ?

Speaker B : Eric, I believe.

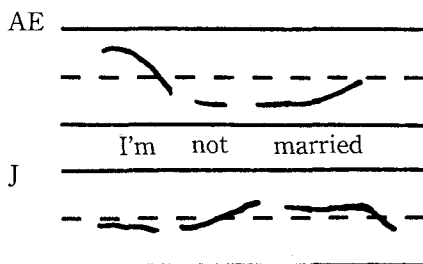


II Speaker A : Say, is that your wife, Bill ?

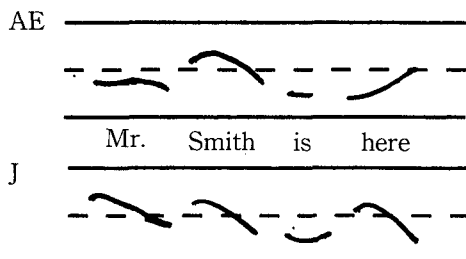
Speaker B : My wife? Where?

A : There. In the picture on your desk.

B : Oh, no! Ha, ha! I'm not married.



III Mother (to her daughter): Ellie! Ellie! Mr. Smith is here.



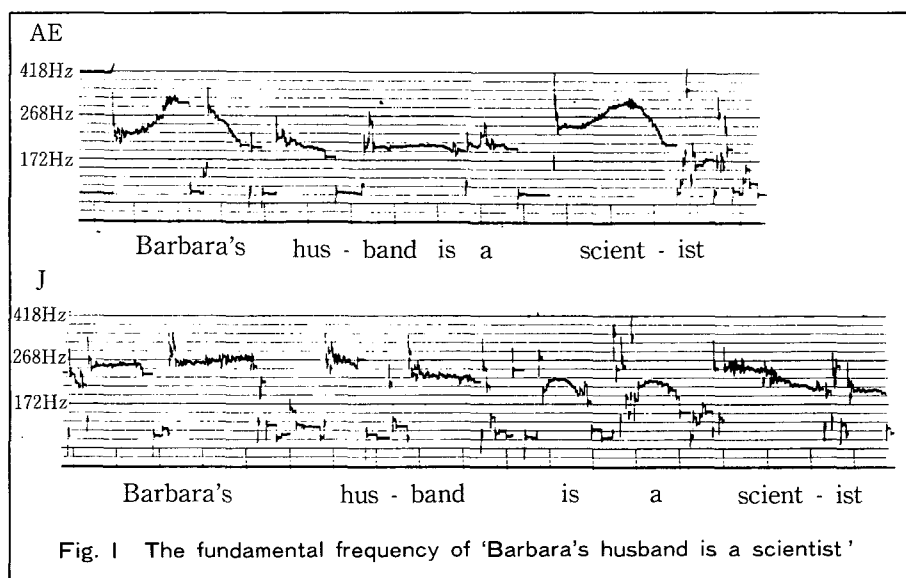
American English of example I implies reserved judgment of a speaker, whereas Japanese learner's intonation J1) does not sound reserved. The speaker gives the impression that she is confident in what she says. In J2), however, intonation contour on 'Eric' is not appropriate for this context; this contour has a warning note, or implies astonishment.

The effect of intonation of native speakers in II and III is airy and casual. The intonation of the Japanese learners, however, may sound brisk and blunt.

How to use intonation to express the speaker's attitude to the situation in which he is placed is another difficulty of Japanese learners newly found out by error analysis.

## 2.2 Acoustic Characteristics

There can be found a difference between whole intonation contour of native speakers and that of Japanese speakers. The following figure indicates the pitch patterns (the fundamental frequency) of the sentence 'Barbara's husband is a scientist' spoken by an American and a Japanese learner.

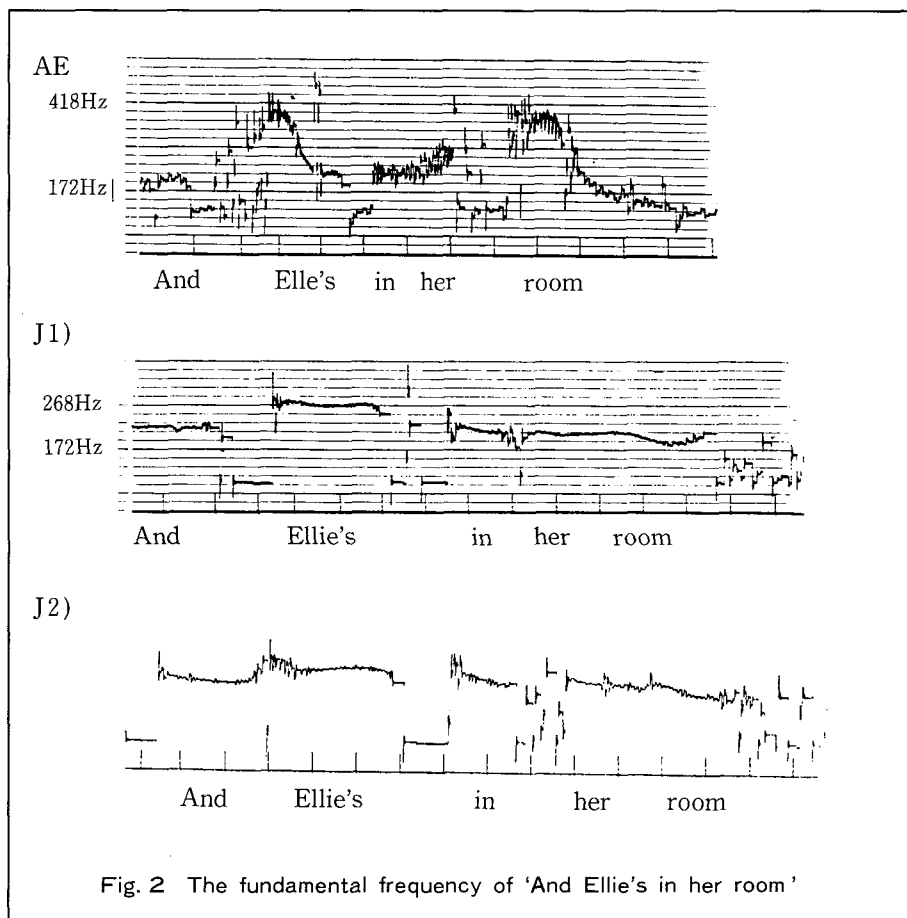


In American English as shown above, the intonation peak tends to come at the last sentence stress. The whole intonation contour of Japanese speakers, on the other hand, tends to be flatter than that of native speakers, and the highest pitch comes at the beginning of a sentence.

The intonation contour of the Japanese language normally begins with a higher pitch and gradually falls towards the end in declarative sentences, commands, or other situations where falling intonation is generally used. Small peaks within a sentence usually do not rise higher in pitch than the intonation peak.<sup>6</sup> The intonation peak in English, on the other hand, usually coincides with the last sentence stress in falling and rising intonation. This differing point of Japanese intonation from English intonation

which was found out by contrastive analysis might influence English pitch contour spoken by the Japanese learners.

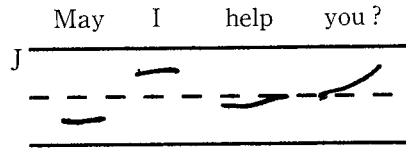
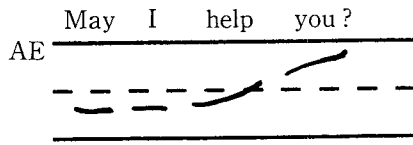
If we look at the word 'scientist,' where the nucleus falls in the above English sentence, the pitch range is smaller in the Japanese speaker's nucleus than in the native speaker's one. Let me take another example :



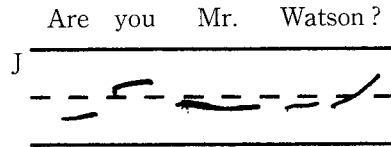
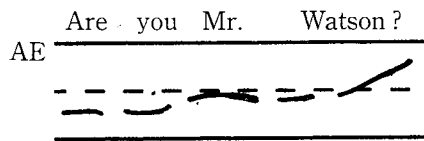
In the above examples of the Japanese speakers, the nucleus is placed on 'room.' It is recognized that the pitch curve of the nucleus spoken by the Japanese learners is not so sharp as that by a native speaker. One of the reasons why English spoken by Japanese people sounds monotonous may be the fact that the heap of the nucleus pitch is smaller.

Another characteristic is seen in interrogative sentences. There is a tendency of the Japanese learners to put higher pitch on the second element of a sentence and suddenly drop the pitch after that.

I May I help you?



II Are you Mr. Watson?



As seen above, English keeps the same pitch at a low level on the first two words. This will be the normal intonation of English. The pitch contour of the Japanese learners may give the impression to the listener that the second word is emphasized.

The overall pitch range of Japanese speakers is narrower than that of Americans. In the sentence, 'Ellie's in her room,' for example, Americans' pitch range is 125 Hz., whereas Japanese learners' is 79 Hz. on the average.

### 3. Summary

Japanese learners of English have difficulties in both attitudinal and acoustical features of intonation. The former needs more attention paid to it since it plays an important role in communication.

As far as the attitudinal features are concerned, Japanese learners have to put higher pitch on the appropriate word or syllable in a phrase or a sentence. They also have to know how to use intonation patterns to express the speaker's attitude according to context or situation.

From the acoustic point of view, the pitch contour of the nucleus should be clearer and sharper, and the pitch range of the whole intonation contour should be widened more in order to avoid the monotonous tone of many Japanese learners of English.

The differing points between English and Japanese intonational systems pointed out by contrastive analysis could explain some of the errors in this paper. But some unpredicted difficulties of Japanese learners have been emerged by this error analysis.

It is suggested for further research that materials of error analysis should be extended to longer sentences such as compound and complex sentences. And in addition, more investigation should be done on the relationships between intonation and stress and pitch of accented words both in English and Japanese.

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### Notes

- 1 Akiyo Joto, "Contrastive Analysis of Intonation in English and Japanese," An unpublished thesis for M. A. submitted to Ball State University, 1981.
- 2 J. D. O'Connor and G. F. Arnold, *Intonation of Colloquial English*, second ed. (London: Longman, 1978), p. 54.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 71.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 64.
- 5 Joto, p. 66.
- 6 *Ibid.*, pp. 63-65.

### References

- Abe, Isamu. *Nichi-Ei Intoneishon-hoh*. Tokyo: Gakushobo, 1977.
- Corder, S. Pit. *Error Analysis and Interlanguage*. London: Oxford University Press, 1981.
- James, Carl. *Contrastive Analysis*. London: Longman, 1980.
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- Nickel, Gerhard, ed. *Papers in Contrastive Linguistics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1971.
- O'Connor, J. D. and G. F. Arnold. *Intonation of Colloquial English*. 2nd ed. London: Longman, 1978.