Accent systems in Japanese dialects

Nobuko Kibe

NINJAL

Mainland Japanese dialects exhibit an astonishing range of variations in their accent systems. These can be classified into a 4-category typology, as shown below.

(1) Systems based on lexical kernel (lowering, ascending or raising) <e.g. Tōkyō, Hirosaki, Narada>

(2) Systems based on word tones (N-pattern accent system) <e.g. Kagoshima, Nagasaki>

(3) Systems combining word tones with a lowering kernel <e.g. Kyōto>

(4) Systems without any lexical accentual distinctions <e.g. Fukushima, Kumamoto>

The question that naturally arises is how these different accent systems emerged and developed to yield present-day dialectal variations. Until now, two main theories have been proposed. According to the first, the accent system of Heian period Kyōto dialect represents the ancestral state. It then spread to all other areas before independently evolving into present-day dialectal accent systems. According to the second, Japanese originally did not possess any lexical accent system. However, a complex accent system emerged in Heian Kyōto dialect, and, under its influence, accentual distinctions also emerged in other areas.

In this presentation, I will first detail the accent systems of 4 dialects representing each of the systems listed above. Then, I will give an account of how dialectal variations may have emerged with special attention paid to the distinctive function of accent.