Pitch Accent Systems in Korean

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Abstract

Research on the Korean accent has been carried out within the Korean linguistics community, but in that context, the Korean accent system has traditionally been compared to the tone system of Chinese, in which pitch contours are syllabic. In contrast, Japanese researchers have proposed that the Korean accent system should be analyzed from the point of view of word-level and phrase-level accentual systems seen in Japanese dialects. One possible reason for this difference of opinion is that recently in Japan, despite the growing influence of the accentual systems of Tokyo Japanese and the dialects of other major cities, a great variety of smaller dialects have been observed and documented, and as a result of this work researchers have discovered accent types that have played a crucial role in uncovering the history and evolution of the Japanese accentual system. In Korea, on the other hand, accent has been lost in the regions surrounding and including Seoul (the national capital) but there are still dialects, mainly in the south-eastern regions of the Korean peninsula, that retain an accentual system and can shed light on the history of accent in Korea. For the present study, I took the Japanese-oriented view rather than the traditional Chinese-oriented view and analyzed the accentual systems of Korean dialects using data from a purely synchronic field survey of several locations across the Korean-speaking region. The field survey includes dialects that have already been documented by Korean and Japanese researchers, but by including the whole Korean-speaking region in its scope and using a new theoretical framework, the current study was able to highlight the shortcomings of previous work. The current study presents the Korean accent types and their geographical distribution. Moreover, by comparing the various accent types, it was possible to look back and investigate how the Korean accent system has evolved up to the present day.