

Intonation at the end of interrogative sentences in Japanese dialects

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Interrogative sentences have a final rising intonation in Modern Standard Japanese: *korewa nan desu ka*↑ “What is this?” or *arewa hune desu ka*↑ “Is that a ship?” (/↑/ denotes rising tone). If pronounced with a final falling pitch, such sentences can be interpreted as questions with a modal meaning of reproach.

Some dialects do not use a rising tone at the end of interrogative sentences. For instance, in the Kagoshima dialect, a falling pitch appears in interrogative sentences like *koja nai ka*↓ “What is this?” or in yes-or-no questions like *aja hune ka*↓ “Is that a ship?” (/↓/ denotes falling pitch). These sentences can be pronounced with a rising tone, but this conveys strong doubt or urges the addressee to respond. Some dialects like the Matsumoto dialect, spoken in Nagano prefecture, or the Hiroshima dialect use both intonations. A falling pitch is used in interrogative sentences and a rising tone is used for yes-or-no questions. This type of intonation system is similar to English. On the other hand, gradual rising tone in interrogative sentences can be found in the Fukuoka dialect.

One may wonder why such differences in interrogative intonation are observed among Japanese dialects. It is related to the structure of interrogative sentences. Japanese dialects can be categorized into two types: (i) dialects in which there must be at least one interrogative word form in interrogative sentences and (ii) dialects in which it is not necessary to have an interrogative word form in interrogative sentences. In the former type, there is a tendency to use a falling pitch at the end of interrogative sentences. In the latter type, a rising tone at the end of a sentence conveys the interrogative meaning.

For instance, Tokyo Japanese can be categorized as the latter type. Therefore, interrogative meaning can be conveyed by using a sentence-final rising tone only, even if the sentence does not contain any interrogative word form, e.g. *arewa hune*↑ “That is a ship?”. Of course, an interrogative marker /-ka / can be added at the end of the sentence, like *arewa hune desu ka*↑ “Is that a ship?”, or the sentence like *korewa nan desu ka*↑ “What is this?”, which accompanied by interrogative word form /nan/ “what”, can be pronounced with a rising tone at the end of the sentence. The Kagoshima dialect is regarded as the former type. In this dialect, interrogative sentences must contain at least one interrogative word form. For example, *aja hune ka*↓ “Is that a ship?” has an interrogative marker /-ka / and is pronounced with a falling pitch. The same goes to *koja nai ka*↓ “What is this?” has both /nai/ “what” and an interrogative marker /-ka /. A falling pitch is used in this sentence.

However, we have observed the emergence of an innovative pattern of intonation in the Kagoshima dialect. Interrogative meaning can be conveyed by using a falling pitch at the end of the sentences, even if no interrogative word form is used in the sentence, e.g. *arewa hune*↓ “Is that a ship?”. Obviously, the structure of a sentence and the intonation do not match each other in the traditional Kagoshima dialect. Even though the structure of the sentence does not conform to the traditional Kagoshima dialect, the traditional intonation pattern derived from traditional Kagoshima dialect does not change.