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Lyman's Description of the Late 19th-Century Tōkyō Accent System

Benjamin Smith Lyman (1835–1920), a geologist and mining engineer, was invited to Japan by the Meiji government as a foreign expert (*o-yatoi-gaikoku-jin* 御雇外国人). He arrived in 1873 and stayed almost eight years. He is famous among linguists for his 1894 article on *rendaku*, but in 1878 he published a two-part article called “Notes on Japanese Grammar” in the *Japan Daily Mail*, a Yokohama English-language newspaper. Despite the title, this article deals with the pronunciation of Japanese, and in some respects it is a quite sophisticated description for the time. However, Lyman was thoroughly confused about the Tōkyō Japanese accent system.

Lyman clearly understood that late 19th-century Japanese did not have a stress-accent system or a Chinese-like tone system. He was also well aware of the rudimentary account of the Tōkyō pitch-accent system in the 1872 second edition of Hepburn's dictionary, since he paraphrased it in its entirety. There is little doubt that the system was essentially the same as what we find in Tōkyō today, although the lexically specified accent on many individual words has certainly changed. Lyman's initial response to Hepburn's remarks was very skeptical, but he was less dismissive after a “discussion with some educated Japanese friends,” and he tacked a postscript about accent onto the first installment of his article.

This poster will present interpretations of what Hepburn and Lyman wrote. There is no indication that either of them understood that a word might be unaccented. Furthermore, Lyman does not seem to have realized that the Tōkyō and Kyōto systems were different, and it is likely that the accent patterns he reported involved a confusion of the two. Lyman was not completely unaware of dialect variation in accent, since he correctly noted the absence of accent distinctions in Aizu (now Fukushima Prefecture), which is in the center of the large “accentless” region in southern Tōhoku and northern Kantō. On the other hand, it is not clear who he was talking about when he claimed that “some Japanese” were not aware of accent distinctions. He recommended listening to “somebody of good intelligence and clear articulation who makes no pretence whatever to a literary education,” but this suggestion seems disingenuous when juxtaposed with his reliance on his “educated Japanese friends” for accent judgments. And, of course, we have no way of knowing what dialects these friends spoke natively.