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Deaccenting morphemes in Japanese

Although most nominal compounds are accented in Japanese, some nouns exceptionally trigger deaccentuation when they are the second element of a compound (N2) (e.g. *iro'* 'color'; *midori-iro* 'a green color'). These nouns are called "deaccenting morphemes" and have been considered to be exceptional. That is, it has been argued that they require specification as a deaccenting morpheme in the lexicon (Kubozono 1997). However, most deaccenting morphemes share two properties: (i) they are final-accented and (ii) the length is two morae. This skewed distribution of deaccenting morphemes implies that they are not mere exceptions. The aim of this study is to reveal the mechanism which gives rise to the distribution within the framework of Optimality Theory (Prince & Smolensky 1993/2004).

This study points out that deaccentuation is a strategy to avoid the violation of two constraints. With regard to (i), deaccentuation avoids the violation of NON-FINALITY (σ) when N2 is final-accented. Although the violation of NON-FINALITY (σ) can be avoided by accent shift, deaccentuation is preferred if NO-FLOP-PROMINENCE (i.e. "No shift") dominates MAX-PROMINENCE (i.e. "No deletion"). On the other hand, penultimate-accented N2 and unaccented N2 do not undergo deaccentuation even if NO-FLOP-PROMINENCE is ranked high, preserving the original accent or inserting a new accent. With regard to (ii), deaccentuation avoids the violation of Align-L (σ', root), which requires that the left edge of any accented syllable should be aligned with the left edge of a head root. If N2 has two morae, accent shift to the antepenultimate position (e.g. *iro'*; **midori'-iro*) violates ALIGN-L (σ', root). In contrast, it does not violate ALIGN-L (σ', root) if N2 has three morae (e.g. *kotoba'* 'language'; *hana-ko'toba* 'the language of flowers'). When N2 has two morae, accent shift to the penultimate position may be another possible strategy to satisfy Align-L (σ', root), but it is not an actual option (e.g. **midori-i'ro*). That is, accent shift is prohibited when it involves the violation of NON-FINALITY (Ft). This implies that NO-FLOP-PROMINENCE is conjoined with NON-FINALITY (Ft). In addition, accent insertion in the antepenultimate position is allowed even if N2 has two morae (e.g. *mushi* 'insect'; *kabuto'-mushi* 'beetle'). In other words, the violation of ALIGN-L (σ', root) is allowed if NO-FLOP-PROMINENCE is satisfied. This implies that ALIGN-L (σ', root) and NO-FLOP-PROMINENCE are locally conjoined.

In summary, there is a certain special constraint ranking which can trigger deaccentuation, where [NO-FLOP-PROMINENCE & NON-FINALITY (Ft)]$_{PrWd}$ and [NO-FLOP-PROMINENCE & ALIGN-L (σ', root)]$_{PrWd}$ are dominant, and the ranking can be assigned to any noun irrespective of its accentuation and length. However, the effect of deaccentuation appears only for those nouns which are final-accented and which have a length of two morae. Thus, the skewed distribution of deaccenting morphemes is explained by constraint interaction rather than specification in the lexicon.

References

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