

Japanese vowels under change?
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There are ample reports on younger Japanese speakers' language, whose speech is often described by lay people as 'strange' ('hen') or 'vague' ('aimai'), perhaps due to their different usage of words and phrases and of pronunciations resulting from different morphological processes or to their use of a flat accent pattern. Young females particularly are subject to such comments as 'not clear' ('hakkirishinai) or 'loose'/'sloppy' ('darashinai'). These comments seem to refer to their pronunciation, and in this study I explore the possibility that vowel placement might play a role in the perception of these differences.

This first attempt compares the vowels of three older (79-87) and three younger (19-20) female speakers of Tokyo Japanese. The data was collected in 2000-2001. All five vowels were analyzed using Praat and plotted along F1 and F2 dimensions. A minimum of 17 tokens of each vowel was analyzed for each speaker, all taken from a reading passage.

If it is the case that vowel placement is one of the causes of young female speech differences, one possibility is that the younger speakers' vowels are more centralized than the older speakers', a factor that might cause the perception that these speakers are 'not clear'.

The results show some differences in vowel configurations. The older speakers' systems almost form an "ideal" 5-vowel system (Lindblom 1986), with the exception of the expected fronting of /u/, but their /u/ is still lower in F2 than their /a/ except for one speaker. However, the younger speakers' systems show that their /e/ and /i/ are closer (particularly in F2), and their /u/ is consistently more fronted (higher in F2) than their /a/. One younger respondent also shows a lowering of /e/ and raising of /o/, not shown in any other respondent, although another young respondent also shows a higher /o/, resulting in almost the same height for /e/, /u/, and /o/.

What are the linguistic motivations? Perceptually, there is no pressure for such change, since the distances between the five vowels, if not maximized (Lindblom 1986), are still large. From a systematic viewpoint (Ohala 1980), however, a five vowel system would "prefer" the point vowels of the triangle — high front, high back, and low central. The younger speaker's raised /o/ may fulfill this need in the high back area vacated by fronted /u/. It is true that two of the young respondents show a triangle-shaped configuration. One might argue that the lowering of /e/ is a result of its no longer having a mid-back "partner," but it is also true that /i/ and /e/ are closer in younger speakers' configurations.

Due to the small number of respondents, further investigation is necessary to see if the differences obtained from these respondents can be considered a more general case and, if so, if it follows any social patterning such as change from above or below and social class preferences.