

Non-native Comprehension and Perception of a Japanese Dialect Spoken in Yamagata

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Background: The Japanese language has a rich variety of dialects. When a language has multiple regional variations, some dialects can be considered better or more respected than others, as how English spoken in Birmingham and Manchester are seen as lacking in prestige by British people due to their accents (Hiraga 289). In Japanese, the Tokyo dialect is generally regarded as “standard Japanese” and the most appropriate to speak in public settings such as the workplace or school since the end of the 19th century (Jeszenszky et al. 1). While some dialects are widely represented in media and popular culture, others are less commonly spoken and understood. Focusing on the Murayama dialect spoken in Yamagata prefecture, this paper aims to contribute to the study of a less widespread variety of the Japanese language. Particularly, this paper investigates the extent to which native Japanese speakers who do not speak the Murayama dialect, which is distinct from the standard variety in phonetics, accent, vocabulary, and grammar, understand sentences written in the dialect and their attitudes toward people who speak in such a manner in daily life.

Methodology: 41 (27 women, 3 men, 11 unidentified) native Japanese speakers responded to a 15-item online questionnaire. None of the participants were from Yamagata prefecture, and all of them spoke Tokyo Japanese on a daily basis. Participants were presented with five written sentences in Murayama Japanese and were asked to provide their interpretation in the standard variety. Subjects were also asked of their impression of the dialect used in the example sentences and its speakers. The attitude questions were modeled after Murakami (85-88).

Results: For (1) *Obandesu* (“Good evening”), 70.7% of respondents correctly answered *konbanna*, the same greeting in the Tokyo dialect. Some of those who failed to identify the phrase as the greeting still correctly interpreted *ban* as ‘night,’ giving the literal interpretation of the phrase, “It is nighttime” or explaining it as “It is time for dinner.” For (2) *Kowakunaigaa* (“Are you not tired?”), only 4.9% of participants accurately interpreted both the word *kowai* as ‘tired’ and the sentence-final particle *gaa* as a question. All 41 participants gave an answer to this question, and all included a sense of negation in their response, as the negation marker *nai* is common across the Murayama and the Tokyo dialects. For (3) *Tukattazuu* (“I am tired”), only 24.4% correctly identified the word *tugadda* (“tired”), while the majority of respondents (56.1%) misinterpreted it as *tukatta* (“used”). 29.3% correctly identified the sentence final particle *zuu* (intensification), however, the rate falls to 2.4% when considering consistency with the responses to the other sentence with the same particle. Only 24.4% successfully included the meaning of the auxiliary verb *ke* (past or recollection) in their responses for (4) *Suupaaniigarekekegaa* (“Were you able to go to the supermarket?”), and the percentage drops to 9.6% when accounting for consistency with the responses to the other sentence with the particle. Moreover, only 22% included the meaning of the auxiliary verb *re* (potential) in their interpretation despite the fact that it is used similarly across various dialects. Finally, (5) *Goyaidakekezuu* (“I had gotten angry”) had

the lowest rate of accurate responses, with 0% successfully interpreting the whole sentence and 2.4% correctly identifying the verb *gosityagu* ('get angry'). Most respondents interpreted *gosityai* as *gosai* ('five years old').

Despite most giving the correct response for (1) *Obandesu*, participants were much less accurate on other example sentences. The high accuracy on the first phrase is consistent with the fact that it is used not only in Yamagata but also among speakers of other dialects in the Tohoku region. There was no correlation between the respondent's age and their comprehension accuracy. While all respondents above 30 correctly interpreted (1) *Obandesu*, there was no difference found in interpretation accuracy between age groups for the other four example sentences. Respondents who demonstrated the highest accuracy on comprehension were from Tohoku or had family members who speak another variety from the region. These results indicate that dialectal features from the region are not widespread and difficult to interpret. The survey also revealed the participants' attitudes toward the dialect. 41.5% answered positively and 22% responded negatively, with 36.6% being more neutral. 19.5% indicated that it was difficult to understand, which was classified as a neutral attitude along with responses such as 'casual' and 'rural.' No subject above the age of 50 expressed negative attitudes, which may suggest that older populations have more positive attitudes toward different dialects. 73.2% indicated that they associated the speech style with the elderly, although the phrases included in the survey were common Murayama dialect phrases that speakers of any age range would use in daily life. 17.1% associated the sentences in the Murayama dialect with farmers, which is consistent with the existing stereotype perpetuated by the media about the dialects spoken in the Tohoku region. Some participants (26.8%) linked the dialect explicitly to Tohoku or northern regions of Japan, while others (36.6%) had a general impression that people from rural areas would speak with these features.

Conclusion: Participants' comprehension accuracy demonstrated that features of the Murayama dialect are not widespread, and native Japanese speakers from areas in which the dialect is not spoken have difficulty understanding it. Some respondents indicated that they find "non-standard" varieties "difficult to understand and need to refer to the context to understand, as I would with foreign languages," which implies that non-speakers of certain dialects are unable to fully comprehend them nor communicate in them fluently, consistent with the results from the comprehension section. Although older participants viewed the sentences less negatively and overall had higher levels of comprehension than did younger participants, this study reveals that there is no general trend toward positive or negative perceptions of the Murayama dialect, and the affective evaluation varies among subjects, regardless of comprehension.

References: Hiraga, Yuko. "British attitudes towards six varieties of English in the USA and Britain." *World Englishes* 24.3, 2005. Jeszenszky, Péter, et al. "Lexical Variation in Japanese Dialects Revisited: Geostatistic and Dialectometric Analysis." *Abstracts of the ICA (Online)*, vol. 1, 2019. Keiichi, Murakami. "Geiyosyotoo kookoosei no Kansai hoogen ni taisuru isiki / imeezi" *Bunrin*, No. 39, 2005.