

Can we fix a natural class to /a/ and /i/?

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This paper highlights the advantage of a theory of phonological elements over a feature-based theory, as the latter cannot provide a viable feature to express a natural class consisting of the vowels /a/ and /i/, which both have a strong tendency to carry word-final lexical accents in native Standard Japanese (SJ) nouns. The phonological elements proposed in Government Phonology directly account for such an asymmetric distribution of lexical accents: the headedness of the simplex melodic elements A and I. The occurrence of the metrical head of a word-domain thus depends upon the quality of its elements. This paper is the first to highlight the distribution of lexical accent and its relation to the quality of the co-occurring vowels in Japanese.

The predictability of the site of pitch accent assignment marks SJ as a language subject to a metrical structure just like stress accent languages (Yoshida 1999). Yoshida (1999) also assumes the location of lexical accents in native morphologically simplex words to be relatively unpredictable, but my recent search results in exhaustive lists of binuclear and trinuclear native words clearly reveal an asymmetric distribution depending on the nuclear expressions. The majority of word-final accents cluster on /a/ (35%) and /i/ (37%), while the two mid vowels /o/ (12%) and /e/ (11%) attract fewer. Lexical accents rarely appear on /u/ (5%).

From this data I propose the two elements A and I to be headed, and U headless, in SJ. When attached to nuclear positions, these headed simplex expressions tend to become the licenser of a word domain, the accented nucleus. A compounding within expressions, witnessed in /o/ (UA) and /e/ (AI), reduces the odds of the nuclear position serving as the metrical head, since the head element already licenses an operator within the melodic composition.

SJ has another class, accentless words, in which headship appears word-finally. In these instances, headship stems from the domain itself rather than the individual word-final nuclear positions (Yoshida 1999). Indeed the melodic content of the word-final nuclear position is irrelevant to such a domain and can even be licensed to be uninterpreted (p-licensed).

References:

Yoshida, Yuko (1999) *On pitch accent phenomena in Standard Japanese*. Holland Academic Graphics, The Hague.