Deriving Accent from Structure: The case of Japanese verbs
Thomas Schöklér (University of Vienna)
thomas.schoekler@univie.ac.at

Nouns in Standard Japanese exhibit multiple pitch-accent patterns – a phenomenon, which has received numerous elaborate explanations in the literature. Verbs (as well as adjectives), on the other hand, seem to form a two-pattern system, only distinguishing between accented and unaccented stems. Within their inflectional paradigms, however, the accent kernel (i.e. the position after which the pitch contour falls) is not linked to a specific position in the stem but seems to shift depending on the suffix(es) attached. The accented stem shine- ‘to close’, for example, exhibits forms like shimēru, shimemāsu, shimeta, shimērēru, shimechau, etc.

Compared to the vast literature for nouns, previous accounts of the accentual behavior of Japanese verbs have been rather limited – often simply presenting the above-mentioned two-way distinction and adding that there must be “specific rules” (Labrune 2012) for the various suffixes. Some more detailed works focus on the behavior of specific suffixes – usually looking at the differences in the accent assignment of -ru and -ta (e.g. Y. Yoshida 1995). None of these accounts, however, present a model that is able to derive the assignment of the accent kernel throughout complete paradigms.

In this presentation, I move away from the idea of assigning individual rules to each suffix. Instead, I propose a typology classifying verbal suffixes based on their morphological properties. What results from this is a way to derive all accent patterns using only a single accent assignment rule, without making direct reference to any specific suffix. In this model, all the different accentual patterns within a paradigm are the direct result of the morphological structure of the specific form. Additionally, I want to address cases of verbs which do not seem to fit into the two-pattern system neatly, like kāeru ‘to go back’ or kotāeru–kotāru ‘to answer’ and present explanations for their seemingly different behavior. Finally, I will discuss possible ways to include Japanese adjectives into this system as well.

Selected References