The Influence of Heavy Syllable Position and Accent

on Learners' Perception of Special Morae:

The Case of Native Speakers of English

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Summary

This study investigated what kind of factors influence English learners of Japanese in their perception of a heavy syllable that includes a long vowel or a geminate consonant. In the experiment, the stimuli consisted of a series of three-syllable pseudo-words controlled by three factors: (1) special moraic types (a long vowel or geminate consonant); (2) heavy syllable position (in the first or second position); and (3) the position of the accent (first or second syllable, or no accent).

The participants were 32 native English speakers who were novice Japanese learners. They were auditorily presented the stimuli and asked to judge whether the words included a heavy syllable unit and the special moraic types, and to indicate where the heavy syllable unit was located in each stimulus.

The results showed that the learners could perceive a heavy syllable with a long vowel more easily than one with a geminate consonant. Additionally, an accent's position appeared to influence the perception of the heavy syllable. Significantly, learners could better perceive a heavy syllable with a geminate consonant when the accent was at the second syllable than when it was at the first syllable or when there was no accent.

If the stimuli had a heavy syllable with a long vowel, the position of the heavy syllable influenced. In this condition, learners appeared to perceive the heavy syllable more easily when it was in the first position; for example, "ぱーたが" (paa ta ka), rather than in the second position; for example, "ぱたーが" (pa taa ka), regardless of whether the accent was located at the first or second syllable.

This suggests that we need to focus on the existence and position of a heavy syllable and an accent when teaching the perception of Japanese morae.

Key words: perception, special morae, heavy syllable position, the position of the accent, L1 transfer