

The Japanese Syllable Debate: A Skeptical Look at Some Anti-Syllable Arguments

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Most phonologists analyze Japanese as having both moras and syllables: one-mora light syllables, two-mora heavy syllables, and even three-mora superheavy syllables, although this last category is marginal. There is, however, no colloquial Japanese word that denotes a Japanese syllable in this sense, and ordinary native speakers know how to count moras but not how to count syllables (Vance 2008:115–116; Labrune 2012:116). Traditional Japanese language researchers do not accept this notion of syllable and treat the second mora of a putative long syllable as a “special” mora, which is less independent than an “ordinary” mora but not part of a syllable-sized unit. Labrune (2012), in a provocative article, argues that syllables are so inconspicuous in Japanese that the language can be described without reference to them, suggesting that syllables may be not universal.

Labrune (2012:135) treats special (dependent) moras as “deficient” because they do not conform to the canonical CV pattern for ordinary moras. In particular, she treats V moras like the first mora in /ike/ 池 ‘pond’ and the last mora in /sao/ 竿 ‘pole’ as deficient, with an empty C position, but it is not clear how this analysis can account for the distinction between a long vowel and a sequence of two identical short vowels. For example, in careful pronunciation /jiH/ シー ‘G’ (where /H/ represents moraic vowel length) is pronounced [dʒi:], while /jii/ 辞意 ‘intention to resign’ is pronounced [dʒi*i] (where [*] represents vowel rearticulation) (Vance 2008:58). Labrune (2012:136) analyzes /H/ as just the feature value [–cns], and it is realized by simply prolonging the quality features of the immediately preceding vowel. What needs to be explained is why /jii/ is not pronounced with a long vowel, since two adjacent feature matrices are identical (both [–cns +hi –bk]). Why are they not merged into a single matrix associated with both vowel slots? Intuitively, the second mora of /jiH/ behaves like a special (dependent) mora, but the second mora of /jii/ behaves like an ordinary (independent) mora, and in fact, traditional accounts in Japan treat most or all V moras as ordinary moras (e.g., Kindaichi 1966:17–18).

Labrune (2012:137) proposes that the property shared by all deficient moras is that “they are not readily accentable.” Since many onsetless vowel moras do carry accent, Labrune (2012:141–142) argues that the distinction between full and deficient moras is gradient rather than categorical and that onsetless vowel moras are closer than other deficient moras to the full end of a full-to-deficient continuum. This proposal predicts that the likelihood of carrying accent should increase along the continuum from deficient to full. In fact, however, there is an abrupt discontinuity between onsetless V moras and traditional special moras (i.e., moraic vowel length /H/, the moraic nasal /N/, and the moraic obstruent /Q/).

For example, this presentation will show that an onsetless /a/ mora is no less likely than a /na/ mora to bear accent. If /a/ is a deficient mora, although near the non-deficient end of the proposed continuum, it presumably should show at least some resistance to bearing accent. Many compounds contain a second element (E2) that begins with /a/ or /na/ and, according to well-known patterns of compound accentuation, should have E2-initial accent. Typical examples include /iši+a¹tama/ 石頭 ‘hardhead’ and /kuni-na¹mari/ 国訛り ‘provincial accent’. Neither /a/ nor /na/ shows any propensity to repel accent.

There is good reason to believe that the moraic subsystems of the Japanese writing system (i.e., *hiragana* and *katakana*) are the major factor in making moras so salient and syllables so “inconspicuous” for ordinary native speakers of Japanese (Kubozono 1999:57; Inagaki, Giyoo, and Otake 2000).

References

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