

# Intercultural lessons on vocal pitch



Richard Keith

Pitch is often pivotal in determining the meaning of words in Japanese.

**H**aving worked in Japan for some months now, I have had the opportunity to observe my Japanese colleagues and friends when they communicate. It goes without saying that there are numerous differences between communication in English and Japanese, and I have no intention of attempting to highlight them all here.

However, one area of the Japanese language has piqued my interest; and with the apologetic caveat that I am simplifying here for the sake of time and space, I will explain it below, for it may illuminate certain communication issues closer to home.

Japanese is usually described as a pitch-accent language<sup>1</sup>, where the meaning of a word can be influenced by changes in pitch on the *morae*. (*Mora* equate, very roughly, to syllables, at least for our purposes; the “pitch accent” is a raised pitch.)



*In Japanese, pitch is important when determining the meaning of a word Tubiermont, (2021)<sup>2</sup>.*

Take the word, “hashi”, for instance: *hash-i*, with the higher pitch on the first morae means “chopsticks”, yet *hash-i* with the higher pitch on the second morae, means “bridge”.

Or the word “ima”: when the pitch accent is on the second morae (*i-ma*) it means “living room”, when the pitch accent is on the first morae (*i-ma*) it means, “now”.

Note that there are regional variations in Japanese pitch accents and there is some debate regarding the extent to which native Japanese speakers identify meaning using pitch accents such as the above, with some scholars

suggesting that the context of a word is more important for comprehension. Nevertheless, pitch accent is an inherent part of the language, where specific changes in pitch are designed to convey meaning naturally.

In one way this is similar to English. English is a stressed language (technically a variable stressed accent language), where, for instance, the emphasis of a syllable in a polysyllabic word can be important to the correct pronunciation. We say, “i-rre-gular” nor “i-rre-qu-lar”, and “im-por-tant” rather than “im-por-tant”.

Yet in English the meaning of a word almost never changes if we put the stress in the wrong place; it just sounds... wrong.

Even with words that are spelled the same but mean different things, most of the time we alter the sounds when we speak. Take a word like “content”: we say con-tent to mean “the thing contained” whereas when we say

con-tent, meaning “happy”, we flatten the initial diphthong to a schwa: c(ə)n-tent.

The second important difference is that in English we can – indeed, we nearly always do – find other ways to emphasise a syllable in a word, and then a word in a sentence. Aside from a pitch change, the most common vocal tools we use are volume and duration: we usually either get louder, or we lengthen or shorten a syllable or word.

Duration is, of course, related to pace; if you lengthen your syllables then you will likely slow down your speech rate overall.

**Advice squeezed straight from the experts**



## Intercultural lessons on vocal pitch (cont...)

But duration and pace are not the same, for you can pronounce your syllables at a constant rate, yet by adding in more pauses in between your words, you will slow down your words per minute overall.

In Japanese, pitch is objectively essential to creating accurate meaning, therefore being able to control pitch change when you want to is rather important.

The result is that native-Japanese speakers are notoriously quite aware of this, and sensitised to using pitch. Although I can't claim to have had any conversations with Japanese music teachers, it is said that they believe perfect pitch can be taught to anyone for this very reason.

This may be a lovely linguistics lesson, but how does knowing any of this actually help? Well, perhaps native speakers of English should accept that the way our language functions does not make us naturally gifted when it comes to hearing and using pitch change for emphasis. Of course, this may or may not be true for those of you whose first language is not English: it depends on the language, but it may be an interesting thing to explore, if you haven't already.

But like many things in life, just because something does not come naturally does not mean we can't do it; it just means that it we probably have to try a bit harder to master pitch changes if we are to wield this particular linguistic weapon with any real impact.

At GPB we have spent many a coaching session helping clients improve their voice, and very often we work on pitch modulation—the movement up and down in pitch height through words

and phrases. We help clients to hear the positive effect of strategic pitch changes, help them to make those changes with their own voice and, almost invariably, help them to appreciate the difference between what it sounds like in their head and how an audience hears those pitch changes!

We have found that you can almost always make bigger pitch changes than

initially expected and, provided it is done authentically, you sound more engaging, dynamic and persuasive.

Simply put, the effective use of vocal pitch modulation can convey meaning, and dynamism. Clarity and memorability are often beneficial by-products. Knowing more about your voice, and especially how to control it in the way you want, can help maximise your communication skills. This is something we can all aspire to, irrespective of the language being spoken.

By Richard Keith



*"We usually either get louder, or we lengthen or shorten a syllable or word" Richard Keith. Hryshchenko (2021)<sup>3</sup>.*

Advice *squeezed*  
straight from the  
experts



### Sources:

1. Tamaoka, Katsuo, et al. (2014). *Is pitch accent necessary for comprehension by native Japanese speakers?—An ERP investigation*. Journal of Neurolinguistics 27.1 (2014): 31-40.
2. Tubiermont, F. (2021). *Recording session in FL Studio* [image]. Available from: <https://unsplash.com/photos/fV1pbUFPggq> [Accessed 23 March 2021].
3. Hryshchenko, V. (2021). *Orange sheets of paper lie on a green school board and form a chat bubble with three crumpled papers* [image]. Available from: <https://unsplash.com/photos/V5vqWC9gyEU> [Accessed 23 March 2021].