

The Actuation of the Shift from Word-Medial [ŋ] to [g] in Tokyo Japanese

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At NWAV-AP2 in 2012, Junko Hibiya reviewed research on the shift (still in progress but nearing completion) from word-medial [ŋ] to [g] in Tokyo “standard” Japanese. Kindaichi (1942) showed that the speakers leading the change were from the Yamanote area (western Tokyo), which contains many middle- and upper-class residential neighborhoods (Hibiya 1999:106). One likely reason that [ŋ] has been losing ground, despite its normative status, is its association with the stigmatized dialects of the Tōhoku region of northern Honshū, as suggested by Nambu, Asahi, and Aizawa (2014) in their account of a parallel shift in Hokkaidō.

A remaining question, however, is what Weinreich et al. (1968:102) called the “actuation problem.” That is, using Mufwene’s (2001) terminology, how did pronunciations with [g] get into the population of variants so that linguistic change had something to work on?

Hibiya (1999:111) says, “The change must have started in the early twentieth century . . .” As she notes, well-known descriptions of late 19th-century Tokyo pronunciation by foreigners report word-medial [ŋ] (Hepburn 1872:xv; Chamberlain 1886:2). There is, however, a contradictory report in a less well-known but meticulous description by the American geologist Benjamin Lyman, who worked in Japan from 1873 until 1880. Lyman (1878:17) claimed that medial [ŋ] was not a Tokyo characteristic but “only a provincial variation.”

I will argue that medial [g] arose in the Yamanote area because the dialect spoken there in the late 19th century was a koiné (Siegel 2010:154) involving contributions from speakers from all over Japan who flooded into the new capital. Previously, the Yamanote area had been home to samurai families, also from all over Japan, because of an anti-rebellion policy requiring the lord of each domain to spend alternate years in Edo (i.e., Tokyo), with his wife and heir remaining permanently as hostages.

Japanese dialectologists (e.g., Hirayama 1998:171) regard medial [ŋ] as an eastern feature, and as Chamberlain (1907:16) noted, “In western Japan, g retains its hard pronunciation in all situations.” Lyman’s house was in the Yamanote area, and his circle of upper-class acquaintances was presumably the source of his notion that [ŋ] was a provincialism. In any case, his report provides clear evidence that medial [g] was already in play well before the beginning of the 20th century.

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