

日本人ブロガーの /r/ と /l/ について 予備研究

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Japanese Bloggers on /r/ And /l/ A Pilot Study

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Abstract

Blogs are to the social scientist what free markets are to the economist: above all a source of authentic data which are impossible to obtain under laboratory conditions, as these are inevitably tainted by the researcher's wishful thinking. But like free markets they are not without fault: on the one hand they have the potential to lead to an unexpected discovery, owing to the wisdom of crowds; on the other hand they reduce the researcher to a passive observer, because of their here-and-now and resistibility to experiment. Perhaps their greatest value lies in allowing all manner of exploratory study, thus providing clues to more fresh or more thorough research. This pilot study is a modest attempt at demonstrating the usefulness of blogs to the field of speech study, focusing on insights that can be gained from eavesdropping on Japanese bloggers discussing English /l/ and /r/.

Introduction

From Goto (1971) and Miyawaki et al. (1975) to Cutler et al., (2006) and Ingvalson et al. (2012) - with important staging posts along the way such as Lively, Pisoni, Yamada, Tohkura and Yamada (1994) and Hattori & Iverson (2009), to name but very few - researches in bi-lingual perception and phoneticians from around the world have tried to come to terms with native Japanese (NJ) speakers' struggle to acquire /r/ and /l/ in English. Nearly half a century on, and with learners showing little sign of improvement, the problem continues to intrigue, and not infrequently trouble, both scholars and countless NJ users of English alike.

Japanese websites have been abuzz with comment and controversy inspired by the R/L conundrum for some time (Poludniak 2012). A simple, spur-of-the-moment Google search on "R pronunciation"¹, performed at the time of writing this paper, produced nearly three million hits; another one on "L pronunciation" yielded a comparable number. Even a more specific Weblog search on "R/L anxiety"² generated nearly forty thousand hits. The idea of r/l pronunciation "going viral" sounds quite astonishing - even in the age of social media.

Equally unexpected is the high quality of a good deal of bloggers' comments, often illuminating - even sobering - to the student of speech and language: it turns out that some insights gained through little more than introspection can be as profound as those found in the pages of august scientific journals.

In order to avoid suspicions of demagoguery, we offer a brief review of a blog discussion chosen, almost haphazardly, on the basis of its relevance and being up to date. In this way we hope to prove that blogs can be mines of ideas waiting to be explored. We survey the arguments involved in light of the current state of knowledge, looking at how the two English phonemes /r/ and /l/ relate to their closest Japanese equivalent /r/, both in speech and in the written, romanized form. The blog was set up under the title "Gekiyaku.com", operated by Google. The entry which started the discussion was posted in July, 2013 and reads: *Why do people say the Japanese can't pronounce /L/?*³ By January 2014, some 304 comments had been posted, with about half the respondents actively engaging with the implied premise. The posts are in English translation, with the original Japanese text included in the footnote together with the relevant http status code.

1. The raison d'être of the letter {r} in the Latinised version of written Japanese.

An abiding concern among Japanese bloggers is with the way Japanese /r/ is represented in the transcription of Japanese writing into the Latin alphabet, called romaji. Japanese has three main romanization systems, Hepburn, Kunrei-shiki and Nihon-shiki, yet all three consistently transliterate the phoneme /r/ with the letter {r}, which in the opinion of many bloggers is incorrect.

Their concern is understandable, given, for example, the fact that Japanese passports show their owners' names in romaji, affecting the way in which their identity is projected to the outside world. A blogger, writing a post in 2010, invokes the reaction of a Japanese friend exasperated at the distortion of his/her name by foreigners misled, in his/her view, by the official system of romanization:

- (1) *One of my friends now living in New York, wishing to have the letter {r} in his/her name pronounced correctly, is actually spelling it with an {l} instead.*⁴

In this case a change in the system of romanization is required for the benefit of foreigners attempting to pronounce Japanese words. This next blogger, on the other hand, in an entry of 2013, objects to the symbol {r} in romaji on the grounds of it being a poor reflection of Japanese /r/ phoneme in terms of articulation:

- (2) *I'd say {l} was the more likely pronunciation of the /r/ phoneme. {r} is harder to pronounce. I somehow can't see why romaji still uses the {r} symbol.*⁵

The argument in favour of representing the Japanese phoneme /r/ in romaji with {l}, to the exclusion {r}, need not strike the specialist as a particularly good solution, because of the inherent ambiguity of Japanese /r/ vis-à-vis r/l. On the other hand, if either {r} or {l} might do, whatever inclined the original romaji authors

towards the former? A post in an earlier blog, of 2010, comes up with a persuasive answer relevant to our subsequent discussion.

- (3) *[...] To conclude, it's not about how /r/ sounds to the Japanese, it's about how it sounds to Westerners. In that distant past they decided it was all going to be /r/.*⁶

The above debate is illustrative of the impact blogs can have on the speech researcher looking for inspiration: the arguments at hand may be of marginal interest, but the fact they are exchanged online and provide a window onto his/her potential research subjects' unprompted opinion can act as a virtual pilot study or confirmation of earlier research.

Personally, I find posts (1), (2) and (3) compelling for two reasons which, at first glance, seem unrelated to the topic. First, they serve as a reminder that Japanese speakers are not as oblivious to the r/l distinction as is often believed, and that the strength of feeling about the whole issue which (1) conveys suggests that appealing to emotion may be a very effective, and possibly underestimated, element in the array of techniques to help with the acquisition of non-native phonological categories in general, and /r/ and /l/ in particular. Secondly, I find them compelling by virtue of hinting at an area largely neglected in bilingual speech research, namely of the interaction between orthography and speech processing. The task for the researcher here might be to explore the possibility

whether sophisticated orthographic testing could answer the vexing question of what constitutes a proficient non-native speech perceiver as opposed to a poor one (cf. Ingvalson et al., 2012).

2. Production vs. perception in the acquisition of r/l.

Another common thread of r/l-related blogs is the question of what makes it particularly difficult to master /r/ and /l/. Two bloggers who signed their posts ryLWViyR0 and T2aW0tY00 observed, respectively, in 2013:

(4) *I know how to pronounce L and R, but just can't hear them well.*⁷

(5) *Surprisingly, perhaps one in three Japanese can properly pronounce L and R, but as far as hearing goes, perhaps one in thirty.*⁸

Although common sense and plenty of research would suggest that perception came before production (witness the constant monitoring of our own speech by the hearing mechanism), the remark in (4) is not invalid either, for there is evidence to suggest that, in the case of NJ speakers, the link between production and perception of /r/ and /l/ may be at best tenuous (Hattori and Iverson, 2011). Further, there is also evidence that r/l production can, paradoxically, supersede perception (cf. Goto, 1971; Sheldon and Strange, 1982).

If such purely productive acquisition were to occur, it could only rely on tactile perception,

akin to deaf speech. From the point of view of articulation, there is indeed little reason why this could not happen. The English lateral approximant /l/, for example, is already part of NJ speakers' phonetic inventory as a well-documented allophonic variant of the Japanese /r/ (Okada, 1991). The central approximant /ɹ/ is certainly more difficult for NJ speakers to acquire, but not impossible, for even that variant of /r/ has been confirmed for the Kansai dialect (Magnuson, 2009).

Equally intriguing is comment (4), with its intuition about the ratio of good Japanese r/l producers and perceivers to poor ones (1:3 and 1:30 respectively). As it happens, speech scientists have not worked this one out yet, at least for the population of the country as a whole. At the moment, (as implied above) the hunt is on to establish in principle what it takes to be a proficient NJ perceiver of non-native phonetic categories (Ingvalson et al., 2012). Until that is clear, it will not be possible to put blogger T2aW0tY00's figures to the test.

3. The proximity of Japanese /r/ to /r/and /l/.

NJ bloggers may be in disagreement about the degree of proximity – with opinion ranging from Japanese /r/ being regarded as broadly covering both English /r/ and /l/ to a belief that it has more affinity to one member of the pair – yet they nearly all seem to agree that English /r/ is the more remote of the two. Let us start with the first view from the blog of

2010.

(6) Japanese /r/ exists in the space covering sort of both Western European /r/ and /l/⁹

This suggests that Japanese /r/, is a kind of half-way house, sharing features of both English /r/ and /l/, without being identical with either. The expression used, “space”, can be understood either in an articulatory or perceptual sense, which the blogger doesn’t make clear; however, we can surmise from earlier discussion of difficulties with r/l perception that it is pronunciation he has in mind.

Here is blogger bF3m0XU0 writing in July, 2013, taking an asymmetric view of the proximity between Japanese /r/ and r/l:

(7) The Japanese >ra,ri,ru,re,ro< is neither /r/ nor /l/, is it? Surely. I believe /l/ is comparatively closer. I guess it’s 70% for /l/ and 30% for /r/.¹⁰

Most Japanese bloggers express the same opinion: Japanese /r/ is closer to English /l/ than it is to /r/. Yet here lies a major bone of contention between the prevailing NJ opinion and that of speakers of various linguistic backgrounds whose phonological systems display the r/l contrast, and who, when asked to judge the most common NJ productions of Japanese /r/, usually hear them as a flap /r/, i.e., an allophone of /r/ rather than /l/. It is also this difference of perspective which lies at the heart of the controversy implicit in the

following comment by blogger KP8QcAFT0 the question posed at the beginning, the one which had initiated this particular thread on the blog:

(8) Japanese can pronounce /l/ because it’s simply [the Japanese] /r/; it is /r/ which they cannot pronounce, Ms/Mr Foreigner.¹¹

This difference of perspective among people of different linguistic background is a classic example of a cultural difference, if language is viewed as the supreme product of culture. Cultures categorise experience along a continuum and some may happen to treat /r / and /l/ as two separate categories where others treat them as one. The common view has been that Japanese belongs to the latter, yet the issue of asymmetric processing by NJ speakers of English /r/ and /l/ seems to point to a more nuanced approach and has led to increasing research activity (Cutler et al., 2006).

4. Conclusion

Even a fragmentary pilot study of the kind attempted here bears witness to the wealth and range of psycho-cognitive data available on the Net, and reliance on this kind of material for research cannot be overestimated. It is hoped that – with more sophisticated tools for digital data harvesting and analysis, planned for a subsequent part of this project – “big data” processing will start making an impact on bilingual research as well.

- ¹ R/L 発音
- ² R/L 悩み
- ³ なんで日本人って「L」が発音出来ないんだ
<http://www.gekiyaku.com/archives/30106193.html>
- ⁴ 現に、ニューヨーク在住の日本人の友人は、自分の名前に含まれる「り」という文字を正しく発音してほしくて、わざわざ「li」と綴っているほどです。
<http://oshietel.watch.impress.co.jp/qa6062483.htm>
- ⁵ どっちかって言うとな行はL発音だろ。Rの発音の方が難しい。未だにローマ字でr表記するのが納得いかねえ
<http://www.gekiyaku.com/archives/30106193.html>
- ⁶ 結論的にはラ行が日本人のミミにどう聞こえるかでは無く、西洋の人にはどう響くはでしょう。其の昔、彼らはそれを総てRとしたのです。
<http://komachi.yomiuri.co.jp/t/2009/0919/263693.htm>
- ⁷ LとRは発音出来るけどどうも聞き取れない。
<http://www.gekiyaku.com/archives/30106193.html>
- ⁸ 日本人でLとRを発音し分けられる人は意外と3人に1人くらいはいる気がする聞き分けられる人は30人に1人かな…
<http://www.gekiyaku.com/archives/30106193.html>
- ⁹ 西洋のRとLを合わせたような領域にまたがって、日本語のラ行音は存在します。
<http://komachi.yomiuri.co.jp/t/2009/0919/263693.htm>
- ¹⁰ 日本語のラリルレロってRでもLでも無いよね、正確には。比較的Lのほうが近いと思う。L7割 R3割くらいな気がする。
<http://www.gekiyaku.com/archives/30106193.html>
- ¹¹ Lは普通にら行だから発音できる日本人が発音できないのはRな外人んさん。
<http://www.gekiyaku.com/archives/30106193.htm>

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