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# Diachronic Change within an Idiolect

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## 1. Introduction

I cannot dispel my feeling that, with the arrival of the new millennium, we are entering a period of great transition unequalled in recorded history.

We have already reached the point, for example, where it is difficult for young people to truly sense the class system of the past. With sexual discrimination as well, the situation now and a half-century ago is as different as night and day.

In relation to language problems, it is safe to say that the foundations are being swept away from dialectal honorifics, which existed along with these class systems. What transition will gender differences in Japanese undergo in the near future? Agriculture, a key industry in the 20th century is being shaken from its very foundations. It is only natural that those regional dialects, which developed with agricultural communities, should be destabilized as well.

In the world today, we see a massive shift from the old to a new order. Since those who have personal knowledge of this old order are still alive, it follows that we are now in the only period in history when we can record concrete and detailed description of the ways things are.

Those of us who have followed these currents now find ourselves teetering before a waterfall of unprecedented proportions. It was impossible to see these falls when we were further upstream, and they will once rush out of sight as we progress further downstream as well.

## 2. Sketch on language shift within an idiolect

The main topic for regional language communities in Japan after World War II was the standardization of Japanese. As mass media,

such as TV and Radio became widespread, the language variety based on Tokyo Japanese diffused rapidly throughout the country. This language variety functions as a common language in formal situations. In some areas of Japan it is used in informal situations as well. Thus, traditional dialect forms are disappearing in some dialects of Japanese.

In this paper I will focus on one particular speaker in a language community and the relation to lexical items that exist in the community.

Synchronically speaking, each lexicon in a person's vocabulary belongs to one of the following four categories.

- (a) unrelated: lexical items that are never heard or not understood even if heard
- (b) understanding: lexical items that are heard, and are understood
- (c) infrequent usage: lexical items that are occasionally used depending upon the situation
- (d) regular usage: lexical items that are frequently used in daily conversation

This is only one facet in the language history of a person. If we take a diachronic approach, the process of word use during the course of a person's language history is characterized as follows.

At birth, an individual would not possess any of these categories. Therefore, all words would belong to category (a). As the individual starts to have social experiences, a variety of words become as level (b). Some remain in (b), and others proceed from (b) to (c). In some cases, they would proceed further to level (d).

On the other hand, it is often the case that words in level (d) are categorized back to (c), (b), or even to (a) during an individual's language life. This tendency is clearly observed in cases of Alzheimer disease. Furthermore, 'baby talk' is another example whereby words which were used often enough to belong to level (d), then moved back to (b) or (a).

Apart from 'baby talk,' all individuals have had opportunities to

think about the language changes that have occurred over the course of their lives. It is highly likely that even if individuals live their lives in the same area, they can recognize that they are using different language forms from those used in the past.

I am currently conducting a longitudinal survey using a female informant born in 1924 in the Gokayama area of Toyama Prefecture (Sanada 1983). This survey aims to clarify what kind of replacement lexicon occurs over the course of her life. Also this survey attempts to figure out into which category each lexeme is placed at certain points in her life (For the methodological issue on studying idiolects, see Kunihiro/Inoue/Long 1998).

For the rest of this section, I will present the diachronic change of each of the 26 lexical items. They are arranged based on semantic similarities. Below, I have listed a summary of the informant's response (in her own words) towards each lexical item. (Headwords are given in their Standard Japanese form.)

1) *jishin* 'earthquake'

When I was a child, I heard old people used *nae*, I did not use it.

Whilst old people said *nae ga iku* to express that an earthquake has happened. I used, *jishin ga iku* or *jishin ga yoru*.

2) *kiri* 'fog'

When I was a child, I used to say *kasumi*. At that time, I had no semantic distinction between 'fog' and 'haze.' Later, I used *kasumi* except for formal situations. In recent years, I use *kiri* more frequently.

3) *niji* 'rainbow'

In my childhood, I used to say *nyūji*, but some people also said *nyōji*. *Nyūji ga deru* refers to a rainbow appearing. Later, it was replaced with *niji*.

4) *katatsumuri* 'snail'

When I was a child, I used *nebauji*. There is no semantic difference between 'snail' and 'slug.' Later, I came to know that *katatsumuri* refers specifically to 'snail,' but I still used *dendenmushi*

more often than *katatsumuri*.

5) *kabocha* 'pumpkin'

When I was a girl, I used to say *bobera*. Later, I came to say *kabucha*, instead. Recently I use *kabocha* more often. A *kabocha* is a different kind of pumpkin from the one I ate as a child.

6) *akanbo* 'baby'

When I was a child, I heard old people said *gago* although I personally did not use it. I used *nenne*. I came to use *akanbo* or *akachan* later. Recently, I use *akachan*.

7) *atama* 'head'

I have only ever used *atama*. I have heard other expressions such as *zuko*, but it sounds vulgar.

8) *hitai* 'forehead'

I used to say *futai* when a child. I also used *kobe*, but I used it to mean 'front of the head.' *futai* has changed into *hitai*.

9) *shimoyake* 'chilblain'

In my childhood, I said *ikiyake*. Later, I used *shimoyake* more often than before. Nowadays, I rarely see the condition itself.

10) *shippai* 'failure'

*Shizukunai* was used when I was a girl. It also meant injury. Later, I came to use *shippai* instead. I know the expression, *shikujiri*, but I myself do not use it. In recently years, I sometimes say *misu* in formal situations.

11) *yobu* 'call'

I said *yoboru*. For example, *shiyōnin o yoboru* meant 'call a servant.' But in recent years, I use *yobu* more frequently.

12) *ōtosuru* 'vomit'

There are a lot of lexical items to express this word. When I was a girl, old people said *itaku*. I used expressions such as *gēshiru*, *kayasu* and so on. *Gēshiru* is used when you talk to children. Later, these expressions were replaced by such words as *ageru*, *haku*, *modusu*. I know the formal Japanese form *ōtosuru*, but I rarely use it.

13) *suppai* 'sour'

I basically use *sui*. As I got older, I also used *suppai* especially when I talk to young people.

14) *nioi* 'smell'

When I was a child, I heard old people saying *kaza* although I did not use it. Instead, I used *hanaga*. Later I also used *niyoi*. Recently I have used *nioi* more than *niyoi*.

15) *daidokoro* 'kitchen'

I used to say either *mêja* or *tanamai* in my childhood. They meant 'water room', and 'in front of shelf' respectively. Later, I came to use *nagashi* or *daidokoro*. The latter is more widely used now. Recently, in formal situations, *kicchin* is preferred. The form of a kitchen has changed dramatically.

16) *sentaku* 'washing laundry'

When I was young, old people used to say *araimon*, but I did not use it. I said *sendaku*. This term later became *sentaku*. Nowadays *kurtningu* is used to describe a place where you can have your clothes laundered.

17) *saihô* 'sewing'

When I was young, old people used *sendaku* to mean sewing and not 'washing.' I used both *harishigoto* and *noimon*, but the former I used more frequently. Later, I came to use *saihô*, which has become the norm.

18) *kimono* 'clothes'

I said *bâ* or *kinomo* when I was young. *Bâ* was used when talking with children. *Kinomo* has been replaced by *kimono*.

19) *warasei-amagu* 'straw-raincoat'

I used to say *gozabushi* when I was a child. It means 'straw hat'. Recently, this raincoat can only be seen in folk craft shops.

20) *kyahan* 'leggings'

I said *chahan*. Later, this form changed to *kyahan*. You do not see them nowadays.

21) *himo* 'string'

When I was a girl, I used to say *hebo*. Later, I used *himo*.

22) *tako* 'kite'

I said *ika* in my childhood. Later, I came to use *tako*. *Ika* is not used at all these days.

23) *eki* 'station'

When I was a girl, I used to call a railway station *tēshaba*. Later, I came to say *eki*.

24) *terebi* 'television'

Of course, TV did not exist in my childhood. Immediately after being invented, the TV was called *terebi*. However, I also know the word *terebijon*.

25) *urushi-shokunin* 'a person who works with japan lacquer'

I used *nushiya* in my childhood, but later, I saw these people less and less. Recently, I seldom see them at all.

26) *mukashibanashi* 'a folktale'

When I was a girl, I said *mukashi*. I used to ask old people, *mukashi kattate kudasari* 'tell us a folktale.' Recently, there is a decreasing number of old people who can tell folktales.

Figure 1 shows the process of change in each lexical item. In order to grasp the usage, I have placed them in four time periods as follows:

1930s: informant's infancy

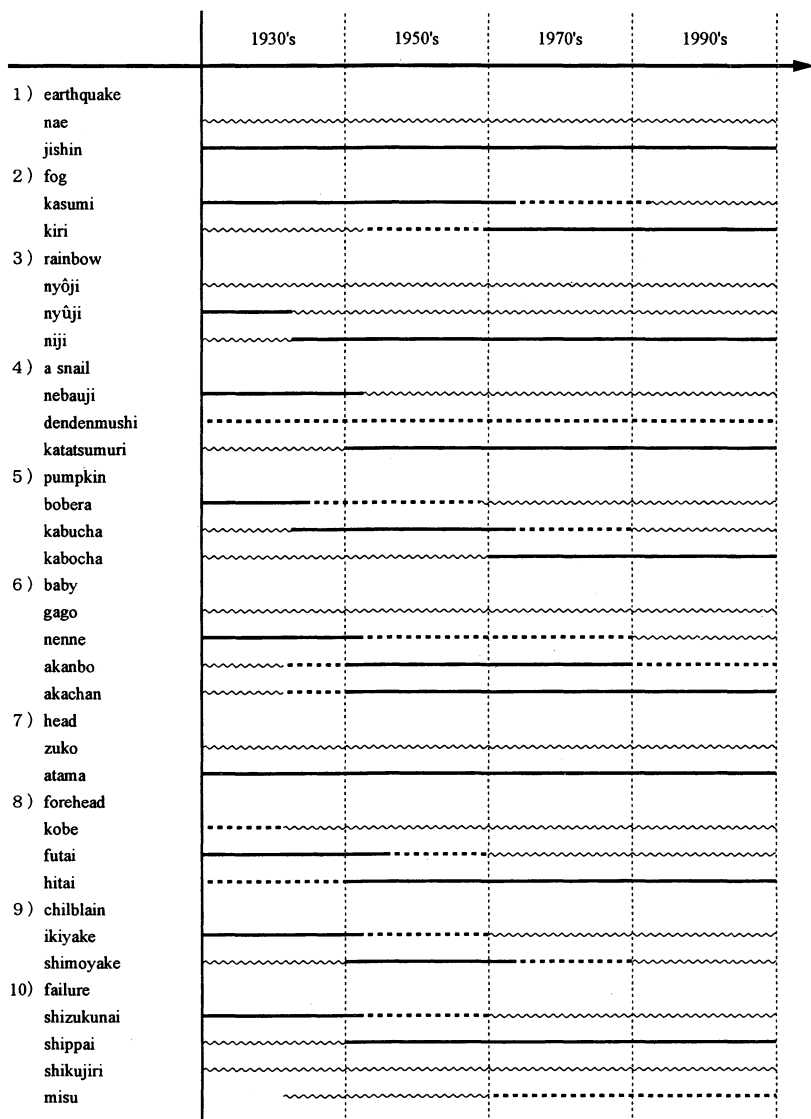
1950s: informant's young and middle age

1970s: informant's mature age

1990s: informant's old age

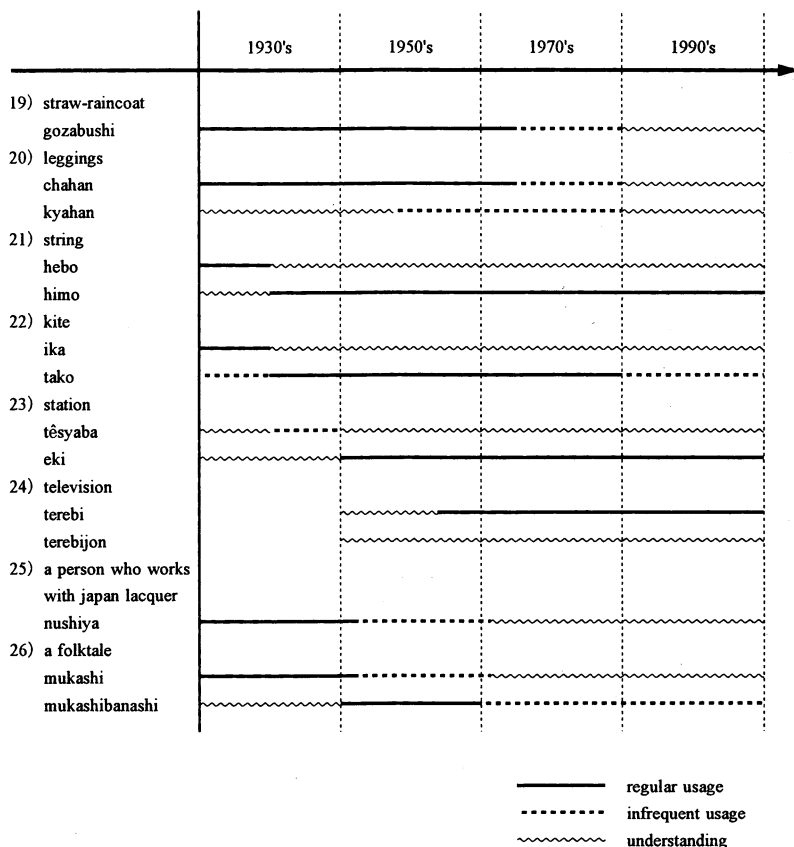
The results show the aspects of the language change of one individual, who has spent her entire life in one language community in one period of history. The description in this paper only deals with one speaker, but it would be a mistake to regard the results as simply representing language acquisition at the individual level. Rather it is possible to infer that this shift clearly shows the diachronic change of language use in the language community itself. Therefore, in the history sketched out above, we can deduce language shift in this language community. This illustrates one aspect of the decline of dialects.

Figure 1





	1930's	1950's	1970's	1990's
11) call				
yoboru				
yobu				
12) vomit				
itaku				
gēshiru				
kayasu				
ageru				
haku				
modosu				
ōtosuru				
13) sour				
sui				
suppai				
14) smell				
kaza				
hanaga				
niyoi				
nioi				
15) kitchen				
mēja				
tanamai				
nagashi				
daidokoro				
kicchin				
16) washing laundry				
araimon				
sendaku				
sentaku				
kurīningu				
17) sewing				
sendaku				
harishigoto				
noimon				
saihō				
18) clothes				
bā				
kinomo				
kimono				



### 3. Conclusion

It is true that many different factors in modern society have affected the decline of traditional dialects. However, it appears that one of the primary factors is the dramatic changes in society. In Japan, there used to be a lot of naturally occurring communities. That is to say, an individual was born into a community, lived their whole life in the same area and spent their language life within a certain social network.

However, social conditions have changed along with the development of transportation systems and a change in the fabric of society. Therefore, the number of individuals who stay and live their lives in naturally occurring communities is decreasing year by year. Under these conditions, dialects are understandable to those who were born and grew up in the same area, but not to outsiders. Eventually, it is inevitable that dialect speakers use a common language. This common language is fulfilled by Tokyo Japanese which effectively drives local dialects out (Yoneda 1997).

Of course schools and mass media such as TV and radio also play a part in this spread of a common language, but it is this change in society that is the most influential factor in explaining the decline of traditional dialects.

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Tokyo Japanese   language shift   change in society