

Investigating vowel coalescence across Kyushu Japanese varieties: An empirical approach

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This research investigates vowel coalescence productivity across five varieties of Kyushu Japanese. Previous studies, such as those compiled by Kyushu Hoogen Gakkai (1991), have highlighted the prevalence of rich vowel coalescence in these varieties. For instance, in Oita Japanese, vowel sequences often transform into monophthongs, as seen in examples like *aoi* becoming *awi*: ‘blue’ and *taigau* to *taigoo* ‘different’. While Kyushu Hoogen Gakkai (1991) provides numerous instances of vowel coalescence, it's important to consider that these forms are likely ingrained in the mental lexicon of speakers, particularly within noun stems. For example, the Standard Japanese *mainitai* ‘every day’ is often internalized as /me:niti/ rather than /mainiti/ by Oita speakers. Additionally, irregularities in vowel coalescence are observed in Kyushu dialect dictionaries. Examples include *hara=o* to *hara:* ‘stomach=acc’ contrasted with *egao* (not *ega*: ‘smile’) and *ototoi* to *otote*: ‘day before yesterday’ as opposed to *koi* (not *ke*:, ‘carp’). This study concentrates on the interaction between nouns and dative particles to more precisely delineate the phonological productivity.

The study encompasses varieties from Saga and Nagasaki (northwestern Kyushu), Amakusa (central western Kyushu), Shiiba (central Kyushu), and Koshiki (southwestern Kyushu). Data was sourced from published lexical surveys and fieldwork, including Kambe (2003, Saga), Hayashida (1998, Nagasaki), Mori et al. (2015, Koshiki), Kibe et al. (2016, Shiiba), and my own fieldwork in Amakusa. In total, 400 instances of nouns followed by a dative particle were analyzed.

Two key findings emerged. Firstly, the rate of vowel coalescence varied significantly among the varieties. The findings indicated a higher occurrence in Amakusa (70.0%) and Koshiki (65.9%), followed by Shiiba (55.6%) and Saga (26.1%). This pattern starkly contrasts with the notably lower incidence in Nagasaki (4.1%). Such variations suggest a clear regional divergence, with northern varieties generally avoiding vowel coalescence, unlike their central and southern counterparts. Secondly, the study observed variation in coalescence based on the final vowel in a word. In cases where the final vowel was /u/, coalescence was less prevalent (43.6% in Amakusa, 25.0% in Shiiba, 33.3% in Koshiki), with no discernible patterns for other vowels.

This investigation sheds light on the underexplored area of synchronic vowel coalescence in Japanese varieties, offering significant insights into the complexity of Japanese phonology and its regional variations.

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