

# Accent of Tokyo Japanese verb suffixes

Junichi Iida

Some suffixes have accents. In a simple case, the suffix’s accent takes over the stem’s accent, in which case the stem’s accent becomes opaque from the surface form. An example of a suffix that makes the stem’s accent opaque is *imasu*. When this suffix is attached to a verb stem, the surface form will have the last nF on the mora *ma*, regardless of the original accent of the stem, as shown below:

	t·a	ɪ·'masu
	[past]	[formal]
um' “give birth”	unn'd·a	u'mɪ·'masu
	(nF-nF-nF)	(nF-nF-nF-F)
'kak “write”	'kait·a	'kakɪ·'masu
	(nF-F-F)	(nF-nF-nF-F)

In other cases, the suffix has an accent, and yet the surface form’s accent depends on the stem’s accent. In Kyōū, such suffixes are spelled with the symbol  $\underset{\cdot}{}$  (modifier letter low vertical line), called the lower accent. The position of a lower accent indicates where the surface accent will be placed when the stem satisfies the condition for the “move” of its accent. That is,  $\underset{\cdot}{}$  is effective on the surface only under certain conditions, and the phonological shape of the stem—or base if the inflection is recursive—decides whether the conditions are met. The following illustrates how the suffix *inagara* “changes” its accent depending on the stem’s accent:

	t·a	ɪ·'masu	ɪ·'naga $\underset{\cdot}{}$ ra
	[past]	[formal]	[concurrent]
um' “give birth”	unn'd·a	u'mɪ·'masu	u,mɪ·'naga $\underset{\cdot}{}$ ra
	(nF-nF-nF)	(nF-nF-nF-F)	(nF-nF-nF-nF-nF)
'kak “write”	'kait·a	'kakɪ·'masu	'kakɪ·'naga $\underset{\cdot}{}$ ra
	(nF-F-F)	(nF-nF-nF-F)	(nF-nF-nF-F-F)

The condition for  $\underset{\cdot}{}$  to be phonetically effective is generalized in Iida (2024, p. globalist) as below:

*Certain items move the immediately preceding form W's accent A to the lexically specified position P iff A is not W-initial and is either W-final or within one mora from P.*

Notice that in *uminagara* the original accent of the stem *um* is marked by the symbol  $\cdot$ , while the original lower accent of the suffix is raised to  $'$ . This is because the original accent of *um* triggers the “move” of the accent. Kyouro’s spelling rules maintain the transparency of the lexical form here while also maintaining the transparency of the pronunciation. If the stem’s accent is lowered, we know that the accent moved.

A lexical item may have up to two accents per AP. If it has only one accent, it can be either an upper accent or a lower accent, but AP-initial forms cannot have a lower accent. If it has two accents in one AP, they are an upper accent ( $'$ ) and a following lower accent ( $\cdot$ ). Some suffixes lack an accent. Hence, in the inflectional paradigm of a verb, excluding those spanning an AP boundary, the following four types of suffixes are theoretically possible, as far as accents are concerned:

1. Suffixes without an accent:  $t\cdot a$ ,  $t\cdot e$ ,  $i\cdot$
2. Suffixes with one upper accent:  $1\cdot masu$ ,  $1\cdot masita$ ,  $'(\cdot)r\cdot u$ ,  $'(\cdot)r\cdot eba$
3. Suffixes with one lower accent: maybe absent in verbs; found elsewhere
4. Suffixes with one lower and one upper accent:  $1\cdot naga\cdot ra$ ,  $1\cdot kata\cdot$

Additionally, it is worth paying attention to cases where a suffix or a function word that follows a verb form initiates an AP. *Koto* “the fact that” is an example of such a function word. This item follows, among others, the dictionary form of a verb and it initiates an AP.

$'u\cdot m\cdot u$   $ko'to$  “the fact that (one) gives birth”  
 (nF-nF-nF-nF)  
 $'kak\cdot u$   $ko'to$  “the fact that (one) writes”  
 (nF-F-nF-nF)

That this item initiates an AP may be easy to overlook, especially when working with the mainstream framework, because typically, a function word such as this does not initiate an IP. But *kaku koto* clearly demonstrates that *koto* is an AP initial item as it begins with nF and follows F. An F-nF sequence necessarily has an

AP boundary in the middle and hence is a clear indication of an AP boundary, but because the mainstream framework does not take contour tones into account, unless somewhere in *koto* happens to be noticeably higher (which is not obligatory) than the end of the AP that it follows or unless the linguist’s “intuition” somehow tells that the verb-*koto* sequence is *accent-wise* two units, this AP boundary will be ignored. This is an example of a deficiency of the traditional account.

Similarly, *bakari* “all (one) does (is)” is aligned to the left edge of an AP, except I suspect that this is not a coherent syntactic form as this only follows the dictionary form of a verb or an adjective. If a phonetic *bakari* appears after the past form of a verb, it means “just” (as in *kaette kita bakari* “just came back”) instead. I doubt the semantic difference can be attributed to the tense difference or any difference between *ru* and *ta*. If this form is part of a larger lexical form, it is written with the symbol ˘ (modifier letter low grave accent) that indicates, among others, an item-internal AP boundary.

'u'm·u˘'bakari “all (one) does (is) give birth”  
 (nF-nF-nF-F-F)  
 'kak·u˘'bakari “all (one) does (is) write”  
 (nF-F-nF-F-F)

## Notes

This short piece was inspired by Kuroki (p.c.) and was written to illustrate Kyouro’s phonological theory by putting his post into context. He reviewed the manuscript several times and offered me suggestions and encouragement. I am truly thankful for his support.

In response to an early draft, Kuroki kindly informed me that Yanaike (1987) treats *nagara* as lacking a nucleus. Yanaike’s description of *nagara* may seem to contradict mine. However, this is most likely just a notational difference. Generally, in the level tone account, most verb forms are assumed to lack a nucleus at the final mora because a following *content word*’s first mora will not be low. Accordingly, forms such as *nakinagara* “as weeping” as in *nakinagara hanashita* “spoke as (one) wept” is considered to lack a nucleus. Kuroki further pointed out that Yanaike discusses (p. 98) the low tones of *darō* and *deshō* following *ru* and *ta* and accordingly lists additional *ru* and *ta* for the lowering. If he had tested *nagara*

in the same environment as well and had found that *darō* indeed lowered, he might have listed an additional form of *nagara* with a nucleus on the final mora, but it is possible that he simply did not do the said test. Kyouro's spelling form *u mi·'naga'ra* implies that nF extends *at least* up to *ra*. *Nagara*'s next mora's tone depends on the form that follows it. If it has an accent somewhere in itself, that accent provides another ground for nF spreading. When *desu* follows *nagara*, *desu* is F-F because it does not have an accent. *Hanashita*, in contrast, begins with nF because it has an accent.

## References

- Iida, J. 2024. *Proposing a new romanization system of Japanese*. Unpublished manuscript. Version 5.1.3. Available at: [https://github.com/NihongoTopics/Kyouro/blob/master/Proposing a new romanization system of Japanese \(book\).pdf](https://github.com/NihongoTopics/Kyouro/blob/master/Proposing%20a%20new%20romanization%20system%20of%20Japanese%20(book).pdf)
- Kindaichi, H. & Akinaga, K. (Eds.) 2017. 『新明解日本語アクセント辞典 CD付き』 2nd edition. Sanseido.
- Kodama, N. 2008. 曲線声調と日本語韻律構造. 『ありあけ』 熊本大学言語学論集 7 1-40
- Kuroki, K. p.c. [https://x.com/croquis\\_kuni/status/1754310516779143573?s=61&t=P5zngLY-oSHK2OgjuSYsug](https://x.com/croquis_kuni/status/1754310516779143573?s=61&t=P5zngLY-oSHK2OgjuSYsug)
- Monokakido. 2019. *Dictionaries*. AppStore.
- NHK (Ed.) 2016. 『NHK日本語発音アクセント新辞典』 [Monokakido 2019]
- Yanaike, M. 1987. 現代東京方言述部の形態=構文論的記述-3-述部のアクセント. 『学苑』 (573), pp. 106-91.