

Dialect levelling in the area of honorifics in Osaka Japanese – a different perspective.

In recent years Osaka dialect has attracted a lot of attention not only from linguists but also in the media. It has become a dialect widely explored in Osaka and Kansai area (e.g. vending machines ‘speaking’ Osaka dialect), as well as in other areas of Japan. The situation of dialects and their use in schools in Japan has also been changing, following numerous corrections and amendments in the school curricula. The most recent changes are from 1989/1992, and according to these, students should be taught to use different varieties ‘according to settings and circumstances’. All of these factors have brought about a change of status for the Osaka dialect, and possibly a change of the way in which it is used and perceived by people living in the area.

In 2004 I replicated a survey conducted in 1986 (Miyaji 1986) to look at the variability in reported use of honorifics. A set of forms (both local and standard) were presented to a group of high-school students in questionnaires. The students were asked to choose one form they would use for each of the referents and addressees. The difference of reported use proved significant for *oru* versus *iru* (local versus standard form of the verb ‘be’) for four referents and four addressees, with the standard form being chosen more often in 2004. There was also a statistically significant drop in the reported use of local honorific suffix *-haru*. Although differences in the choice of other forms do not prove to be statistically significant there seems to be an overall trend which might suggest *dialect levelling* or possible standardisation in this area of linguistic structure among the speakers of Osaka Japanese. This finding would be all the more significant taking into consideration sociolinguistic studies that have shown how adolescents may be the leaders of language change.

There seem, however, to be several problems when discussing possible language change from the perspective of self-reported studies. In this particular case both honorifics and Osaka dialect are linguistic phenomena widely discussed and overtly commented on. Possible standardisation of language among Osaka dialect speakers suggested by the results of questionnaire, seems to run counter to the wide presence of this variety in e.g. media, as well as its high *ethnolinguistic vitality*. I therefore suggest considering a different perspective when looking at the results. The questionnaires were conducted in a school setting before and after the most recent changes in education curricula. I consider whether the results shed light on the effect of such ‘dialect awareness’ programs being introduced in schools. Since the reports outside of Osaka suggest high prestige for the dialect elsewhere in Japan, results of the questionnaire among high-school students suggests that a diglossic linguistic situation with specific domains of use for both standard and local variety may be relevant. Further studies based on naturally occurring data need to be conducted. However, if this proves to be true this might provide an interesting insight into ‘side-effects’ of ‘dialect awareness’ programs in schools and might help in reconsidering how such programs should be structured.