

Japanese speakers of English: “work” and “walk”

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Japanese speakers’ pronunciation difficulties with /l/ and /r/ and with /s/ before /i:/ and /ɪ/ are well known, but a common difficulty seems not to have been studied: confusion between “work” and “walk”. This confusion was noticed in a larger study of American, British, Australian and Japanese English in Japanese learners’ pronunciation. (These terms were considered adequate in the context of English teaching in Japan. The three used in this paper are abbreviated to AmE, BrE and JE.)

1 “Work” and “walk” in JE Japanese makes extensive use of loanwords from English. Around 40,000 are listed in the 2000 edition of the Sanseido Dictionary (Shinnouchi, 2000:8, cited in Rebeck, 2002:53). “Work” and “walk” are commonly used in JE. Most English loanwords are transliterated into Japanese script based on RP and do not have post-vocalic /r/. Japanese has no central vowels and /ɜ:/ in “work” is replaced by [a:]. The Japanese vowel is between cardinals [a] and [ɑ] (Vance, 1987) but a little higher. The Japanese vowel used in “walk” is between cardinal [o] and RP /ɔ:/ (Vance, 1987). It is very close to the RP vowel in “walk”.

2 Method The subjects were 65 university students of English from two universities in Yokohama and Tokyo; 17 were students at a university with a middle level English department, and 48 were students at the top foreign languages university in Japan. Thirteen subjects from this university had lived in the United States (12 subjects) or Britain (1 subject) with their families for between 1 and 6 years between the ages of 1 and 13. Seven had been exchange students for one year in their teens or early twenties, 5 in the US and Canada, 1 in Australia and 1 in Britain. The subjects were recorded reading five short news stories with a total of 311 words and a reading time of about 2.5 minutes. They were given the scripts a few days before the recording session. The stories had the words “worked,” “walking,” “work,” “housework” and “walks” in that order. The pronunciation of the words was judged by the two authors and by a speaker of General American, with some phonetic training, as part of a larger study of a total of 111 instances of 15 phonemes in the five news stories. The judgement consisted of marking phonemes as sounding good enough as BrE or AmE phonemes (and in a few cases Australian English), marking phonemes which were not acceptable as either BrE or AmE and commenting on why, and marking incorrect use of post-vocalic /r/.

3 Results and Discussion The most striking results, shown in Table 1 below, were:

a) More than twice as many pronunciations of “work” were acceptable as AmE than were acceptable as BrE. About twice as many pronunciations of “walk” were acceptable as BrE as were acceptable as AmE. The American speaker who judged the phonemes has /ɑ:/ for the THOUGHT vowel (Wells, 1982) in his speech.

b) Pronunciations not acceptable as either BrE or AmE came to about a third of the totals for both “work” and “walk”.

	American English	British English	Japanese English [wa:k]	Spelling pronunciations: [ɔ:][ɔ][oɔ][ɔ:r]
worked	30.77	15.38	21.15	32.69
work	59.62	13.46	17.31	9.62
homework	57.69	26.92	9.62	5.77
Total	49.36	18.59	16.03	16.03

	AmE	BrE/JE	Post-vocalic /r/		Confusion of “walk” with “work”	
			[wɑ:rk]	[wɔ:rk]	BrE “work”	AmE “work”
walking	21.15	48.08	3.85	9.62	7.69	9.62
walks	25.00	44.23	3.85	21.15	0	5.77
Total	23.08	46.15	3.85	15.38	3.85	7.69

Table 1. Pronunciations of “work” and “walk” in percentages.

The pronunciations of words with the stems “work” and “walk” are those of the 52 subjects who had not lived in English-speaking countries before adolescence. The other 13 subjects had 5 errors out of 60 tokens. Three of these were BrE, or more likely JE, pronunciations of “walk” in otherwise AmE pronunciation, one was substitution of AmE “working” for “walking” and one was substitution of /ə/ for /ɜ:/ in otherwise AmE pronunciation.

3.1 Work: The most frequent mispronunciation of “work” was the JE pronunciation [wa:k] at 16.03% (25 out of 156), followed by spelling pronunciation with [ɔ:] or [ɔ] at 13.46%. There were two instances with [oɔ], which may have been hypercorrection of [ɔ:], and two with [ɔ:r], pronounced by four subjects. Pronunciations with [ɔr] which were probably spelling pronunciations may have been accepted as AmE because of the shortness of the [ɔ] following the lip-rounding of [w], inflating the total of pronunciations of “work” counted as AmE.

When Japanese speakers pronounce “work” as [wɔ:k], British listeners confuse it with “walk”. When they pronounce it with the JE pronunciation [wa:k], American listeners will confuse it with “walk”.

3.1 Walk: The high total of apparently British pronunciations of “walk” can be explained by the JE pronunciation of the loanword “walk” in Japanese, and the closeness of Japanese [ɔ] to the BrE THOUGHT vowel. Although AmE recorded materials are used in high schools, most Japanese high school teachers pronounce “walk” as /wɔ:k/, and English-Japanese dictionaries used by students produced before 2006 list only the pronunciation /wɔ:k/.

Twenty of 104 pronunciations of words with “walk” had post-vocalic /r/, 16 pronounced

after a JE/BrE vowel. Very few Japanese university students know what the differences between BrE and AmE pronunciation are and do not think of post-vocalic /r/ particularly as a feature of General American. In the recordings of the five news stories, about half the subjects made errors with post-vocalic /r/ in words other than “walk”. Some confusion seems to have been of two words with similar sound or meaning: *fast/first* and *was/were*. Some of the other errors suggested that the subjects felt [ɔ:] should be followed by [r]. Post-vocalic /r/ in “walk” could be explained by either of these two confusions.

There were two hesitations before words with “work” and 12 before words with “walk”. Of the five words with “work” and “walk”, the two with “walk” were second and fifth so the greater hesitation before “walk” may have been an effect of the order of the words: pronouncing the words fairly close to each other probably made the subjects aware that they were not sure how “work” and “walk” are pronounced. One of the subjects asked for clarification of the pronunciations of “work” and “walk” after the recording session. A few errors with “walk” were straightforward mixing of BrE and AmE “work” and “walk”.

4 Teaching “work” and “walk” “Work” and “walk” are both common verbs, so when Japanese speakers pronounce “work” like “walk” they confuse their listeners. Students need to be taught that words spelt with “or” after “w” usually have the vowel of the NURSE lexical set (Wells, 1982) in order to avoid producing British “walk” [wɔ:k] instead of “work”. They also have to avoid the JE pronunciation of “work” [wa:k] which sounds like AmE “walk”.

Teaching Japanese learners to produce the vowel of the NURSE lexical set is not easy. They seem to find it easier to imitate the AmE vowel /ɜ:/ with the vowel rhotacized throughout (Ladefoged, 2001:78) than the BrE /ɜ:/. However many of the subjects who had post-vocalic /r/ had an [ɜ:] followed by a short [r] which the American judge considered barely acceptable or not acceptable as AmE pronunciation. Dictionaries produced before 2006 have /ɜ:r/ where they now have /ɜ:/. The older transcription, or possibly the vowel followed by an “r” in the spelling, may influence students’ pronunciation. If they are taught the AmE pronunciation of “work”, they need to be taught that the peak of the syllable sounds like an “r” throughout, unlike the other rhotacized vowels where there is little rhotacization at the beginning of the vowel (Ladefoged, 2001:78).

Some students with otherwise good American pronunciation reported finding the American vowel in the THOUGHT lexical set (Wells, 1982) difficult to pronounce. The JE pronunciation of “work” is similar to the AmE pronunciation of “walk” so there should be no pronunciation difficulty. The JE pronunciation of “walk” is virtually the same as the BrE pronunciation, and since there is no possibility of confusion with any other word, it can be left as it is, even in otherwise American pronunciation.

References

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Maeda & Saito Japanese speakers of English: “work” and “walk”:4

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