

Ryukyuan perspectives on the Proto-Japonic vowel system

The importance of Ryukyuan for the reconstruction of Proto-Japonic (PJ), the common ancestor of the Ryukyuan and Japanese languages, has long been underestimated. However, several recent studies demonstrate that Ryukyuan preserves many archaic features already lost in the Old Japanese (OJ) language of the 8th century (Frellesvig & Whitman 2008a, Serafim 2008, Pellard 2008, Vovin 2009).

In particular, the Ryukyuan languages are crucial for the reconstruction of the PJ vowel system. This was first shown by Hattori (1978–1979)’s landmark study (subsequently further developed by Thorpe 1983) on the reconstruction of Proto-Ryukyuan (PR) and its comparison with OJ. However, the reconstruction by Hattori of two supplementary PJ vowels *e and *o was rejected by most scholars until recently, notably because it was supported by too few examples.

Based on the data I collected in the field and from existing sources, I propose new comparative evidence from several Ryukyuan languages that support and enhance Hattori’s original hypothesis. The evidence I adduce comes mainly from Southern Ryukyuan, while most comparisons have usually concerned Northern Ryukyuan.

First, I show two mid vowels *e and *o must be reconstructed for PJ, contrary to the long-time standard reconstruction (Martin 1987). The new evidence I adduce falsifies the hypothesis that the examples of *e can be accounted for by a simple phonological rule PJ *ə > PR *e / $_C_{[+voiced]}V_{[+high]}$ (Whitman 1985). I provide several minimal or near-minimal pairs that establish the existence of a distinction between *e and *i as well as between *o and *u in PJ.

Table 1: PJ *e

	OJ	Ōgami	PR	PJ
‘seashell’	<i>mi₁na</i>	mmna	*mina	*mina
‘day(time)’	<i>pi₁ru</i>	pssma	*piru-ma	*piru
‘put in’	<i>ire</i>	uuri	*ire	*irai
‘water’	<i>mi₁du</i>	mikuu	*medu	*meNtu
‘garlic’	<i>pi₁ru</i>	piuu	*peru	*peru
‘color’	<i>iro₂</i>	iru	*ero	*erə

Table 2: PJ *o

	OJ	Ōgami	PR	PJ
‘mortar’	<i>usu</i>	us	*usu	*usu
‘sell’	<i>ur-i</i>	uv	*ur-i	*ur-i
‘to face’	<i>mukap-</i>	nkai	*mukae	*mukap-
‘medicine’	<i>kusuri</i>	ffuu	*kusori	*kusori
‘melon’	<i>uri</i>	uuu	*ori	*ori
‘wheat’	<i>mugi₁</i>	mukuu	*mogi	*moNki

Ryukyuan is generally the only reliable source of evidence for PJ *e and *o, and I thus propose to revise some recently proposed reconstructions (Frellesvig & Whitman 2008a, Robbeets 2009) that are not based on Ryukyuan evidence and are actually contradicted by the data.

I also show Ryukyuan preserves the distinction between PJ *ui and *əi, which have merged as *i*₂ in OJ but can be partly reconstructed by the means of internal reconstruction. This can lead to some new advances in reconstruction for the cases where the OJ data is not clear enough to enable a precise reconstruction. However, the PJ system surprisingly lacks a diphthong *oi. I propose that in fact many of the *ui usually posited should rather be reconstructed as *oi since the Ryukyuan data demonstrates the alternating shape (*hifukukei*) of many apophonic nouns has to be reconstructed with a stem-final *o. Both the Ryukyuan evidence and Arisaka's laws also lead to reconstruct some of the OJ *o* for which there is no distinction between *kōrui* and *otsurui* as *o rather than *ə.

- 'moon' OJ *tuku-* ~ *tuki*₂ :: Yonaguni *kkù-* ~ *tti* < PJ *tukoi (not *tukui)
- 'exhaust' OJ *tukus-* ~ *tuki*₂ :: Miyako-Hirara *tsʰkus-* < *tukoi (not *tukui)
- 'calm' OJ *nagu-* ~ *nagi*₂ :: Miyako-Hirara *nagu-* < PJ *nagoi (not *nagui)
- 'blue' OJ *awo* ~ *awi* :: Miyako-Hirara *o:* ~ *a1* < PJ *awoi (not *awəi), cf. also Arisaka's law: OJ *a* and *o*₂ (< *ə) do not usually co-occur in the same root
- 'be, sit' OJ *wor-* ~ *wi-* :: Miyako-Ōgami *ur-* ~ *puur-* < PJ *woi (not *wəi)
- 'fire, dry' OJ *pos-* ~ *pi*₂- :: Miyako-Ōgami *pus-* ~ *pss-* < PJ *poi (not *pəi)

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