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Review of "A Linguistic History of the Forgotten Islands: A reconstruction of the protolanguage of the Southern Ryukyus", by John R. Bentley

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A Linguistic History of the Forgotten Islands: A Reconstruction of the Proto-language of the Southern Ryukyus. By John R. Bentley. Folkestone: Global Oriental, 2008. Pp. xvii, 309.

Reviewed by Thomas Pellard (Centre de recherches linguistiques sur l'Asie orientale, Paris, France)

The volume under review proposes a reconstruction of proto-Sakishima, the ancestor of the languages of the Southern branch of Ryukyuan, a group of several languages closely related to Japanese spoken in the Pacific islands between Japan and Taiwan. For over twenty years the only large scale historical reconstruction of Ryukyuan available has been Manner L. Thorpe's (1983) dissertation, which unfortunately remains unpublished. In the meantime, numerous descriptive studies have appeared and furthered our knowledge of the different varieties of Ryukyuan. It is now also widely accepted that Ryukyuan preserves several features already lost in Old Japanese and that a careful look at Ryukyuan can greatly enhance our understanding of earlier Japonic (Frellesvig & Whitman 2008a, Pellard 2008, Serafim 2008, Pellard 2009, Vovin 2010). John R. Bentley's book is thus a much welcome contribution to the linguistic history of the Japonic languages.

After a general introduction on the Ryukyuan languages, their relationship to Japanese and methodological matters, B carries out an intermediate reconstruction of each of the Sakishima languages, Miyako, Yaeyama and Yonaguni, and then goes on to reconstruct their common ancestor, proto-Sakishima (PS). In each case the segmental phonology, the accent/tone system and the basic verbal morphology are reconstructed from a blend of dialect comparison and internal reconstruction. The book ends with a very useful appendix of 505 reconstructed words together with their reflexes in the modern dialects.

For reasons of space, this review concentrates on general issues and on some problems concerning Miyako Ryukyuan, the language the reviewer is most familiar with.

STANCE ON PREVIOUS AND CURRENT RESEARCH

Contrary to what the title might suggest, Southern Ryukyuan has by no means been 'forgotten', and several scholars are currently working on both synchronic and diachronic aspects of the Sakishima languages. But most of them have felt the need to go to the field, gather more data and explain some basic problems regarding the development of Southern Ryukyuan before attempting a full-fledged systematic reconstruction. On the other hand, B has chosen to take a short-cut, but, as will be shown below, this has forced him to rely on some incomplete and inaccurate second-hand data.

The book's title and its explanation given in the preface are both misleading and very unfortunate, and they might surprise some scholars actively working on Southern Ryukyuan. One cannot help but wonder why B deplors the fact that most scholars are working on synchronic aspects of the various dialects (p. xv). Given the

paucity of our knowledge on Southern Ryukyuan, diachronic studies are still highly dependent on current descriptive research. Moreover, B sometimes dismisses other scholars' work in a way that could be mistaken as contemptuous. For example, he does not hesitate to dismiss without much consideration the basically accurate description by several scholars of Miyako's special vowel as an 'apical vowel' [ɿ] and sticks to the inappropriate label of 'central vowel' seen in older descriptions. However, it is hardly the case that "almost all scholars concerned" agree with the latter view (p. 65).

Much more problematic is the dismissal (p. 87–88) of [Matsumori \(2001\)](#)'s important discovery of supplementary tonal contrasts in the Tarama dialect. The tentative explanation by B of these hitherto unreported distinctions as an effect of language contact with the Ishigaki dialect is given without any evidence and seems rather unlikely. Matsumori's findings cannot be easily ignored and they invalidate B's reconstruction of the Proto-Miyako tone system.

PROBLEMATIC DATA

A major issue in B's reconstruction is the data sources he has chosen to rely on. Although he seems to have some first hand knowledge of Yonaguni Ryukyuan, most of his data comes from older studies by Japanese dialectologists. Unfortunately many of these are problematic. For example, [Hirayama et al. \(1967\)](#), one of B's major sources, is a rather superficial general survey of Southern Ryukyuan done in haste and full of inadequacies. One can only regret B did not choose to restrict himself to the comparatively well-described dialects, or at least he should have used more recent, much more reliable sources such as [Kokugakuin daigaku Nihon bunka kenkyūjo \(1990, 1992\)](#), [Hirayama \(1992–1994\)](#) or the many lexical lists published in the journal *Rūkyū no hōgen*.

Many of the forms given by B for some dialects are thus erroneous. This is particularly true of those of the Ōgami dialect of Miyako: *pītu* "person" (p. 43) should be *pstu*, *kiffu* "smoke" (p. 47) *kif*, *uvemasukam* "envious" (p. 48) *vɛmaskam*, *fūfi* "comb" (p. 54) *ff*, *ksīmi* "nail" (p. 71) *kuumi*, *fūksi* "mouth" (p. 55) *fks*, etc.

Some vowels in the proto-forms are spurious, like the *i inserted between geminate ss (*sis). These are nothing more than transcriptional artifacts of the well-known habit of Japanese dialectologists to insert 'phantom vowels' whenever they encounter a consonant cluster. The *sīs*-like forms given by Bentley should rather be transcribed as *ss*.

The problems concerning prosodic systems are greater. For example, it is now known that the tone system of Miyako Ikema Ryukyuan is quite different from the description given in previous studies in which the pitch patterns are not accurately described and the phonological analysis is unable to account for the data ([Hayashi et al. 2008, 2009](#)). The Ikema tone system is not a simple system of *accented* vs. *unaccented*, but a complex one in which foot grouping and a trochaic rhythm interact with lexical tones to determine the pitch shape of a word. B also repeats (p. 86) Hirayama's erroneous claim that the Nishihara sub-dialect of Ikema has lost its distinctive tonal system.

The lexical material contained in B’s sources is rather limited in size, which leads B to miss some correspondences and proto-phonemes. A dental affricate *ts is probably needed for Proto-Miyako since, contrary to B’s claim (p. 43), it is not in complementary distribution with *t, as both can appear before any vowel: *katɕu*: “bonito”, *tsu:kam* “strong”, *atsa* “tomorrow”, etc.

On the other hand, the possibility of the reconstruction of a sixth vowel *i for PM is supported by very few examples and most of them are problematic. For example, B is apparently unaware that the common forms for “head” in Miyako are not those he gives on p. 72, all of which are clearly loanwords from Okinawan, though this fact is mentioned in B’s source (Hirayama 1983).

The tentative reconstruction of PS *ə (p.217–218) should also be reconsidered. If we look at more data, we find that the correspondence *a* :: *u* noticed by B is in fact a case of a widely spread irregularity between the two vowels: they alternate in different words in different dialects, and this happens even in recent loanwords (ex: Ōgami *tamatu* < Japanese *tomato* “tomato”, Hirara *tabuku* < Japanese *tabako* “cigarette”).

Some glosses are also erroneous: Miyako *pi:ma* does not mean “sun” (p. 29) but “daytime”, *agi-* “give” (p. 45) actually means “raise”, and *kara*, translated as “because” on p. 68, is in fact an ablative case marker never used to express cause, unlike its cognate in Japanese.

It must also be noted that B has conflated two different Miyako dialects under the label ‘Hirara dialect’: the Hirara dialect proper, and the Ōura dialect, spoken in a village which belonged to the former Hirara city (now Miyako-jima city), but located much farther to the North. Therefore the ‘Hirara’ forms of B represent a blend which is impossible to disentangle. The ‘Hirara’ form *tsigusi*¹ given p. 270 for “knee” is even more puzzling: the actual Hirara dialect has no such pitch pattern for this word (tone is not distinctive in this dialect), and the Ōura dialect has a different vowel (*tsigasī*).

PROBLEMATIC RECONSTRUCTIONS

Several reconstructions are not supported by Southern Ryukyuan internal data, but are driven by the comparison with Japanese and/or Northern Ryukyuan. For example, the reconstruction of *m:ku* “pus” as PM *VmVko but of *m:na* “all” as PM *mVna is only supported by the comparison with their Japanese cognates *umi* and *min(n)a*. Though this kind of reconstruction ‘from above’ cannot really be considered wrong, it does not help to explain the development of the modern dialects. The comparison with Japanese would be of great help at a higher level of reconstruction, but not at this one.

There are other cases where B reconstructs different forms for words exhibiting the same correspondence in the modern dialects. For example “you” *vva* is reconstructed as PM *bura but “envious” *vvyamasī-* as *uCuyamasV-.

The choice of certain phonetic values for the vowels of PM, and PS, is quite puzzling. It is not really clear why B has chosen to reconstruct *e where all dialects have *i*, and *i where the majority of dialects have a fricative vowel. Though they would partly be correct as PR reconstructions, these reconstructions are unable to explain

the spirantization of consonants adjacent to what in most dialects is a fricative vowel. Mechanically reconstructing every *i* as **e* also leads to other problems. For example, “thread” should be reconstructed as PR **ito* since it has undergone palatalization in Okinawan (Shuri *?i:tɕu:*), but if we adopt B’s PM reconstruction **eto*, we are forced to assume a circular change PR **ito* > PM **eto* > modern Miyako *itu*. It is simpler and more logical to assume the PM form had an initial **i* which was retained unchanged, as is the case with other instances of initial **i* before a voiceless stop.

B gives also some wrong comparisons, like Miyako *imi* “narrow” (actually “small”) which cannot correspond to Yaeyama *iba* “narrow” since both roots are attested in the Ishigaki dialect. Similarly, I find very difficult the comparison between the Miyako inclusive marker *mai* with Yaeyama *m/n* since the latter is attested in Miyako in some fossilized forms like *tu-m* ~ *tsu-m* “even”.

A closer look at the whole verbal systems of the modern dialects reveals evidence incompatible with B’s hypothesis on the origin of Miyako verb forms. If, like B, we assume that most Miyako verb forms do not contain a fused form of the stative auxiliary verb **(b)ur-* “to be”, we are unable to explain many peculiarities of the modern dialects. For example, negative past forms are formed with the past tense suffix attached to the negative converb (e.g., Ōgami *ikata-tam* “did not go”), several dialects have an intrusive *-u-* in negative forms (e.g., Yonaha *mj-u:n* “don’t see”), and the forms of some dialects (e.g., Ikema *ifu* “go”) that appear on the first glance to correspond in a straightforward manner to the Japanese ‘conclusive forms’ are used as stems to which a variety of suffixes attach. All of this suggests that the Miyako forms do contain a fossilized form of the stative auxiliary to which most of the tense, aspect and mood suffixes were attached.

Apart from the unsubstantiated claim mentioned above that the tone system of Tarama might be the product of contact with the Ishigaki dialect, B appeals at other times to contact as an ad hoc explanation. The explanation of forms with an unexpected *w* (e.g., *wassaŋ*) “bad” in the Hatoma dialect as loans from Miyako is for instance untenable (p. 113). I am not aware of any evidence of special contacts between Hatoma and Miyako, and anyway in most cases the Miyako forms do not have a *w* in the first place (e.g., *baŋkaŋ* “bad”).

OTHER PROBLEMS

The book is poorly typeset. There are far too many typos, misspellings of proper names (e.g., ‘Swadish’ for *Swadesh*, etc.) and misprints. It is sometimes difficult to distinguish between mere typos and errors in the reconstructions.

Moreover, several references in the text do not appear in the final bibliography, some parts of sentences have disappeared from the text, and glosses are sometimes inverted between examples, which is very confusing. Some inconsistencies are truly problematic, such as on p. 67, where B states he will reconstruct PM **u* for a certain correspondence but actually gives reconstructions with a vowel **o*.

The book was clearly not carefully proofread before printing, and one can only hope a revised edition will appear. For the moment, it is very hard to read, and readers will find it difficult to navigate.

MAJOR ACHIEVEMENTS

Though there are many problems in his reconstructions, B has managed to clarify several points of critical importance for the reconstruction of PJ. His findings add further evidence to the most recent hypotheses on the phonology of PJ (Hino 2003, Miyake 2003, Frellesvig & Whitman 2008a, Serafim 2008, Pellard 2008, Vovin 2010). The classical reconstruction, best represented by Martin (1987), is thus now obsolete in several aspects.

B has for instance presented convincing arguments for the secondary nature of initial *b-* and *d-* in Southern Ryukyuan. Evidence from compounds and loanwords clearly show these are the result of a late fortition process and not archaic features going back to PJ.

He also demonstrates that the final nasal found in certain words in Hateruma is an innovation resulting from ‘an analogically based morpheme boundary restructuring’ and that a similar process has taken place in Yonaguni, but in different words. There is thus no need for the final *N still posited in some reconstructions.

Although B does not elaborate on the correspondences with Japanese, it is clear that the Southern Ryukyuan data cannot be reconciled with the four-vowel system traditionally reconstructed for PJ. Southern Ryukyuan supports the reconstruction of (at least) six vowels for PJ.

B has also summarized many important works on Southern Ryukyuan, compiled a good wealth of data and worked out the main phonological correspondences. Moreover he has pointed out some very interesting problems which must be addressed by future research, like the two reflexes *i* and *u* in Hatoma for the fricative vowel of other Southern Ryukyuan dialects.

CONCLUSION

B’s book is a welcome advance in Ryukyuan and Japonic historical linguistics, and it will definitely be a very useful handbook to scholars of Ryukyuan. Still, nonspecialists, in particular those who would like to compare Ryukyuan with Japanese, should be aware of its shortcomings. B’s reconstruction would need some major revisions before it can be fully accepted. This work should therefore be considered more a starting point for better understanding of Southern Ryukyuan than a definitive reconstruction.

A complete reconstruction of Proto-Sakishima must probably wait until more data is available. But this can only be accomplished through painstaking fieldwork, which must be done before all Ryukyuan languages disappear and actually are *forgotten*.

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