

[Foreword to discussion]

Old, Middle and New: Periodisation as a back-burnered topic in the diachronic research of Japanese

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The proposed contribution to the workshop aims to raise the question of the periodisation of the history of the Japanese language, with the focus on its literate (written) phase.

There are two aspects to this problem, which – although seemingly independent of each other – are nevertheless partly connected: the division itself and the terminology.

The former aspect, that of establishing the time boundaries between periods, is a most basic element of any diachronic description, and yet most historical linguists of Japanese appear to settle for adopting the socio-political periodisation as it comes (see e.g. Frellesvig 2010, Miyake 2020; also Martin 1987, under the somewhat distanced heading “Periods discussed by Japanese grammarians”, and Calvetti 1999, with a longer elaboration). This is hardly satisfying or even acceptable in linguistic research.

Terminology, on the other hand, can be regarded as purely arbitrary and conventional, as well as language-bound, but certain names of periods – even if this is not fully intended – do suggest some stronger connection between particular stages of language development (cf. e.g. *Old Japanese / Early Middle Japanese / Late Middle Japanese* in Frellesvig 2010 versus *Old Japanese / Late Old Japanese / Middle Japanese* in Takeuchi 1999 – referring to the same three time spans).

In both cases the decision about the diagnostic features and their selection are of course of paramount importance, but for Japanese they are mostly left unmentioned.

The paper is not to propose any coherent and ultimate solution to the indicated problems, but rather to spark off a debate over this neglected point of diachronic study of Japanese. The widespread periodisation based on the socio-political history will be presented, its disadvantages discussed and compared with some other – far less popular but usually much better substantiated – propositions available in the relevant specialist literature (as e.g. Rickmeyer 2017 and Narrog 1999, with certain modifications and specifications in Majtczak 2016 and especially in Osterkamp 2021 on the one hand, or Satō 2001 on the other). A very interesting and desirable side effect of this paper might be a parallel consideration of the Ryukyuan languages and of the division of their history into periods.

References

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