

[W10] – The (Pre)History of the Languages of Japan – Current issues and prospects
Thursday September 7th – 13h30-17h

Organisers:

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In spite of its tenacious reputation of being a monolingual country, Japan is actually home to a variety of languages that reflects a rich and complex linguistic history. Although this diversity is now finally starting to be acknowledged and protected, most of the minority languages of Japan are now severely endangered (Moseley 2009).

Thus, this workshop aims at embracing this diversity and at fostering multiple and interdisciplinary approaches to the questions regarding the linguistic (pre)history of Japan.

In this perspective, we will try to bring together researchers of diverse backgrounds and expertise, and to stimulate a discussion about the interactions of various approaches and scales of consideration.

Context

Over the past decades, a lot of research has been conducted on the history of the languages of Japan, and substantial advances have been made on the interaction between archaeological, genetic and linguistic data (for instance, Lee and Hasegawa 2011; Jarosz et al. 2022).

However, the hypothesis of a possible relatedness of the Japonic language family with any other neighbouring language families (and most notably with Koreanic) remains controversial (see for instance Vovin 2010 vs Robbeets 2005).

On an inner Japonic level, since the seminal works of Kindaichi Haruhiko and Hattori Shirō, the past decades have seen a spectacular surge of dialectology, which allowed new discoveries regarding the inner classification of Japonic (Kibe et al. 2021; Igarashi 2021), even though the classification of some famous “language islands” such as Hachijō are still a matter of debate (see Kupchik 2011: 7; vs Pellard 2015: 15 or 2018: 2).

In the meantime, Japan also saw important development in sociolinguistics (Heinrich and Ōhara, 2019; Asahi et al. 2022), which allowed to observe a lot of recent and ongoing language shifts, and especially the importance of new language contacts (ex. Long 2018).

On a philological scale, the numerous studies conducted recently on Eastern Old Japanese (Kupchik 2011; Vovin 2021), on Old Okinawan (Tawata 2010; Lin 2015; Serafim and Shinzato 2021), and the publication of the Oxford-NINJAL corpus of Old Japanese (NINJAL 2020) have dramatically transformed the access to ancient language data.

Similarly, a lot of progress has been made on the reconstructions of proto-languages, following the works of Martin (1987) and Thorpe (1983), and their revisions by Miyake (2003), Shimabukuro (2007) and Frellesvig and Whitman (2008). Intermediary proto-languages have also started to be reconstructed, for instance Proto-North-Ryukyuan (Lawrence 2009) and Proto-South-Ryukyuan (Jarosz 2019). However, in this perspective, one can but lament the lack of a proper etymological dictionary of the Japonic languages, since, sadly, Alexander Vovin could not complete his ambitious project during his lifetime.

On another note, a lot has also been uncovered on the (pre)history of Ainu languages since Vovin’s seminal work (1993), but a lot of questions still remain. Most notably, there is still no consensus regarding the origin of the Ainu, and Ainu can still not be classified as anything but an isolate. In parallel, however, the question of the contact and loans between Ainu and Japonic varieties has become a very active field of research (e.g.: Vovin 2009; Kupchik 2021).

Finally, based on Supalla's works on the linguistic history of the American Sign Language, Japanese Sign Language also has recently become an object of historical and comparative research (Nakamura 2006; Sasaki 2007; Kanda and Osugi 2011). Since that research, the critically endangered indigenous sign languages of Japan such as Amami Sign Language and Miyakubo Sign Language are also gaining rising attention (Kanda and Kimura 2016). However, there is still a lot to be discovered on the origin and evolutions of sign languages in Japan.

Research questions and goals:

Our workshop aims at studying the history and prehistory of all indigenous languages of Japan. Those include discussions on the proto-languages, as well as the ancient and modern forms of all the following:

- mainland Japanese varieties
- Hachijō language
- Ryukyuan languages
- Ainu languages
- 'contact languages', such as Bonin English and Ogasawara Japanese
- sign languages: Japanese Sign Language, Amami Sign Language, Miyakubo Sign Language

Furthermore, we wish to study those languages from several perspectives. Thus, we welcome contribution propositions that may discuss (but need not be limited to):

- the prehistory of the languages of Japan and of their speakers
- the history of those languages
- the changes in the "linguistic ecology" of Japan
- the ongoing changes in the synchrony of the languages of Japan
- the languages of Japan outside of Japan, as heritage or migrant languages (for instance, in Hawai'i, in South America, etc.)
- the implementation of recent concepts and of new technologies to the historical linguistics of those languages

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