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The Historical Development of Japanese Tone

From Proto-Japanese to the Modern Dialects.
The Introduction and Adaptation
of the Middle Chinese Tones in Japan

2010

Harrassowitz Verlag · Wiesbaden

ISSN 0340-6687
ISBN 978-3-447-06282-4

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Acknowledgments

I wish to express my gratitude to a number of people for their help and interest during the long years of research that have led up to this publication. First and foremost, my thanks go out to Professor Frederik Kortlandt of Leiden University, who first directed my attention to the outstanding problems in the historical development of Japanese tone, and the solution that Ramsey's theory seemed to offer to these issues. His advice over the years, and his enthusiasm for the project have been invaluable.

I would also like to thank Professor Ishizuka Harumichi, my supervisor during my study at Hokkaidō University, for pointing out to me – among other things – the importance of the reading notes in the interpretation of Japanese historical texts. Professor Satō Tomomi of the same university kindly shared with me his thorough knowledge of the Ainu language, as did Dr. Anna Bugaeva and Dr. Takahashi Yasushige, who were my fellow students at the time.

Professor Robert Ramsey made it possible for me to extend my research by inviting me to the University of Maryland, where I was able to study, thanks to a Fulbright Scholarship and a grant from the Dr. Catharina van Tussenbroek Foundation. Without the brilliant insight that came to him so many years ago, this book would never have been written, and I know he is as happy about its publication as I am.

I thank Professor James Unger of Ohio State University for his interest and encouragement, and for opening my eyes to the implications that my research has on the order in which the Japanese islands were populated by speakers of Japanese. I would also like to thank Professor Wim Boot, Professor Wolfgang Behr, Dr. Thomas Pellard, Dr. Anton Antonov and Dr. Wayne Lawrence for their corrections and advice. Needless to say, all errors made are mine alone.

The publication of this book was supported by grants from the Leiden University Centre of Linguistics and the Spinoza Prize awarded to Professor Kortlandt.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my parents, who have been a source of encouragement throughout my life, and especially my husband Jean-Pierre, whose support and patience have been truly overwhelming.

I From proto-Japanese to the modern dialects

Introduction

0.1 The subject and aim of this study

The subject of this study is the historical development of the Japanese tone system. My aim has been to determine how the historical development from the tone system of proto-Japanese to the tone systems of the different dialects (both modern and historical) can best be explained.

I have concentrated on the tonal distinctions that can be observed in nouns, as the distinctions in nouns are more numerous than those of verbs and adjectives. Although the latter sometimes show historical developments that differ from the developments in nouns, the differences are small and justify the assumption that a satisfactory account of the changes leading to the richer tonal distinctions in nouns will subsume those of verbs and adjectives; therefore, I discuss verbs and adjectives in this study only in passing.

When one compares the standard explanation of the historical development of the different tone systems in the Japanese dialects (e.g. Kindaichi (1951) and elsewhere) with what is known about tonal developments in other tone languages, Japanese comes across as quite unusual. Many developments posited in the standard theory appear unlikely and even impossible in the light of such cross-linguistic comparisons. In this study, I have tried to explain the Japanese data – both contemporary and historical – in a way that better agrees with what happens in other languages with similar tone systems.

A more phonetically accurate reconstruction of the tone system of the oldest stage in the Japanese language for which we have sufficient data, the language of the 11th to late 13th century or Middle Japanese, forms an integral part of this endeavor.¹ A phonetically accurate reconstruction of the tone system of Middle Japanese is important as the Middle Japanese tone system may contain information on earlier stages in the language. Whitman (1990), for instance, proposed the idea that the Middle Japanese tone system may contain clues as to earlier contractions and vowel

1 The history of the Japanese language is usually divided into the following periods: Old Japanese, the language of the Nara period (710-794); Early Middle Japanese, the language of the Heian period (794-1185); Late Middle Japanese, the language of the Kamakura (1185-1379), Muromachi (1392-1573) and Azuchi-Momoyama (1573-1603) periods; Modern Japanese, the language of the Edo period (1603-1867), and down to the present. This division is based on segmental and grammatical considerations, not on differences in suprasegmental (tonal) features. The tonal spelling system used in parts of the *Nihon shoki* for instance suggests that the tone system of Old Japanese was not fundamentally different from that of Middle Japanese. Likewise, the crucial tone dot material transgresses the boundary between Early Middle and Late Middle Japanese; I use the term Middle Japanese for convenience to designate the language during the whole period when tone dot markings proliferated.

length, while Kortlandt (1993) and Vovin (1997) suspect that the /L/ or /H/ tone of the initial syllable in Middle Japanese may go back to an earlier distinction between voiced and voiceless initial consonants.

0.2 The Middle Japanese tone system and the tone system of proto-Japanese

The reconstruction one arrives at by comparing all known dialects of a language is, by definition, its proto-language. The term proto-Japanese therefore refers to a putative ‘oldest’ stage of the Japanese language that can be regarded as the ancestor of all modern and attested pre-modern dialects.

When we compare the vocabularies of the modern dialects, we find that words of a given length fall into a number of discrete tone classes. In each dialect, some tone classes have merged, but not necessarily the same ones in different dialects; hence, the number of tone classes that has to be reconstructed for proto-Japanese is larger than the number needed to describe any single modern dialect. It turns out that the number of tone classes that has to be reconstructed for proto-Japanese on the basis of a comparison of the modern dialects agrees closely with the number of tone classes implied by the data in the early dictionary *Ruiju myōgi-shō* 類聚名義抄 (11th century), our main source of knowledge about the Middle Japanese tone system.

This means that Middle Japanese had a system phonemically very similar to that of proto-Japanese, similar enough to be used as a working model. It also implies that, even though a large part of the tone dot material probably reflects the tone system of the language as it was spoken in the old capital of Kyōto, the current dialect of the city of Kyōto has no privileged status among modern dialects, since all serve equally as witnesses to proto-Japanese.

0.3 The basis for the reconstruction of the Middle Japanese tone system

There are four distinct types of data that form the basis for the reconstruction of the Middle Japanese tone system. The first two, introduced in sections 0.3.1 and 0.3.2 below will be for the most part discussed in part I of this study; the next two types, introduced in sections 0.3.3 and 0.3.4, will be addressed in part II.

0.3.1 The different types of tone markings in old Japanese texts

Many different means of marking tonal distinctions in texts have been used in Japan, especially by Buddhist clerics. Each method will be discussed at greater length later on; what follows here is just a brief presentation to the different types of pitch markings.