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CHAPTER 6

## A (more) comparative approach to some Japanese etymologies

*Thomas Pellard*

*Chaque mot a son histoire!* ('each word has its own history'). Such was the battle cry of dialectologists and other partisans of the *Wellentheorie* against the sound laws defended by the Neogrammarians. Though few nowadays would deny the regularity of sound changes and the validity of the comparative method, it remains true that recovering the history of words is often akin to detective work, and that the above maxim seems to be valid in the domain of etymology.

Studies on the genetic relationship of Japanese with other languages have usually been based on lexical evidence foremost, which obviously poses problems if indeed each word has its own history. The search for external cognates of Japanese etyma cannot be limited to the comparison of attested written forms but requires a thorough reconstruction of the internal history of the languages involved as a preliminary step. In the Japonic domain, important advances have been made by John Whitman (e.g., 1985, 1990, 2008, Frellesvig & Whitman 2004, 2008a), whose work still forms the base of most studies on both the internal and external history of Japonic.

It seems now widely accepted that the examination of the 8th century Old Japanese (OJ) texts needs to be supplemented by taking into account the data from the different Japanese dialects as well as the Ryukyuan and Hachijō languages (Frellesvig & Whitman 2004, 2008a, Vovin 2010: 3–7, Whitman 2012: 25, Pellard 2008, 2013). Still, few works on Japanese etymology have tapped the rich mines of such 'peripheral' data. One notable exception is for instance the illuminating discussion of the history of personal pronoun shifts in Japonic (Whitman 1999).

Along the same lines, I will propose a more comparative approach to Japanese etymology and give some more examples of how the Ryukyuan data, and to a lesser extent the data from Ainu borrowings, can clarify our knowledge of the (pre)history of the Japanese language.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> All transcriptions of modern languages have been converted to standard IPA notations.

## 1 Of the same womb

Frellesvig & Whitman (2008a) accept the reconstruction of a mid-vowel *\*e* in Proto-Japonic (PJ), as first proposed by Hattori (1976).<sup>2</sup> Though most of the supporting data comes from Ryukyuan, they adduce several examples of *ê/e* ~ *î/i* alternations within OJ which might constitute further evidence of a vowel raising process *\*e* > *î* in pre-OJ.<sup>3</sup>

One of such examples adduced by Frellesvig & Whitman (2008a: 25) is OJ *ye* ‘placenta,’ which they propose to relate to *i* in *irö* ‘of the same mother’ by vowel raising in non-final position. The root (y)*e* is itself scarcely attested in Japanese and it does not actually appear in the OJ corpus proper, but only as a Late Middle Japanese reading tradition of the character 胞 ‘womb, afterbirth’ in the *Nihon shoki*. The first *bona fide* attestation is in the *Shinsen jikyō* (898–901) in the gloss *KONOye* 子乃兄 for the Chinese word 膜 ‘membrane’ (Tenchi 1: v14), but the syllables *e* and *ye* are sometimes not faithfully distinguished in that source (Hashimoto 1950: 208), so that a doubt subsists as to whether this word was actually *e* or *ye*.<sup>4</sup> It is probably related to the later form *ena* ‘afterbirth,’ which is only attested after the merger of the syllables *e* and *ye*.

The Ryukyuan words for ‘placenta, amnion, afterbirth’ point to a different scenario than that suggested by Frellesvig & Whitman. Northern Ryukyuan forms such as Izena *?jã*, Ie-jima *?jã*, Nakijin *?jã*: or Shuri *?jã* do not generally exhibit a loss of the initial vowel to *?j-* and thus point to a proto-form *\*eja* A, with a mid-vowel. On the other hand, Southern Ryukyuan forms such as Hirara *iza* or Sawada *lla* exhibit a liquid and obstruentization of the first vowel, which requires us to reconstruct *\*ira*, with a high vowel. The Northern Ryukyuan forms can be reconciled with the Southern ones if we posit for the former two phonetically motivated, though irregular, changes: progressive palatalization *\*ira* > *\*ija*, and then height assimilation *\*ija* > *\*eja*. Deriving Southern Ryukyuan *\*ira* from *\*eja* would on the other hand require to posit less natural changes.<sup>5</sup>

Though a development *\*(j)ena* > PR *\*ira* might be not completely impossible,

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Proto-Ryukyuan (PR) tone categories are noted by the letters A, B, C. In addition to the references given in the bibliography, I have used my fieldwork notes on Kamikatetsu, Yuwan, Shodon, Okazen, Yoron, Ōgami, and Yonaguni. Japanese prose texts are referred to by volume and page number of the relevant critical edition, or in the case of a fac-simile edition by the name of the manuscript followed by volume, recto/verso, and folio number.

2 See also Pellard (2008, 2013).

3 See Pellard 2010 for further comments.

4 The merger of the two syllables *e* and *ye* was completed by the first half of the 10th c.

5 A form *ija* is recorded in the *Nippo jisho* (1603–1604) for several Kyūshū dialects, and it can also be reconciled with the Ryukyuan data by positing a similar *r*-yodization after *\*i*.

(y)e could also be the result of the contraction of \**ira*, by medial -r- loss ((Whitman 1985: 22–25), Whitman 1990), “Whitman’s Law”, with the usual subsequent crasis of \**ia* into palatal *ê/e*. The comparison is then even clearer with the root attested in many OJ terms for siblings born of the same mother, e.g. *irö-n dö* ‘lesser sibling’, *irö-M ô* ‘younger sister’, *irö-ne* ‘elder sibling’, *irö-se* ‘brother’.<sup>6</sup>

The semantic link between ‘afterbirth’ and ‘sibling’ is not surprising, and the case of Greek ἀδελφός ‘brother’ (lit. ‘of the same womb’) immediately comes to mind. The Chinese words *bāo xiōng* 胞兄 ‘elder brother of the same parents’ (lit. ‘womb/afterbirth-brother’) and *bāo mèi* 胞妹 ‘younger sister of the same parents’ (lit. ‘womb/afterbirth-sister’) are an even closer parallel. The possibility of a link between the root \**ira* ~ \**irə* and OJ *ye* ‘elder brother’ may also be envisaged, since OJ *ye* is a 1.2 noun, that is to say of the high register, and PR \**ira* is probably an A-tone word, which corresponds to the Japanese high register.

It is further possible to compare PJ \**ira* ~ \**irə* with the Ainu root *ir* ‘(be) sibling’, though the direction of the borrowing is not clear. The Ainu root, even though it does not occur alone, is found in many words denoting siblings and relatives of the same age, like in *ír-utar* ‘siblings and cousins’, *ír-okkayo* ‘brothers’, *irwak* ‘siblings and other relatives of similar age’ in the Saru dialect.

## 2 Flat hills and other mysteries

Both the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon shoki* relate the myth of the god Izanagi going after his deceased wife Izanami in the land of the dead (*Yomi*). Besides its striking similarities with the Greek myth of Orpheus, this tale contains a linguistic puzzle.

Having found his wife in the land of the dead, Izanagi breaks the taboo by looking upon her corpse and flees, terrified by what he saw. Then, he is pursued by a thousand five hundred army until he reaches a place called *Yōmo-tu-pîra-saka*, the limit between the land of the living and that of the dead, and manages to escape by pulling a giant rock to obstruct the passage.

In the *Kojiki*, the toponym is written 黄泉比良坂 (1: 66), with only the part *pîra* written phonographically, while the *Nihon shoki* has both a logographic notation 泉津平坂 (1: 14, 16) and a phonographic spelling *yōmo-tu pîra-saka*

6 We might also add *ira-tu-mê* ‘my lady’, with the usual *a* ~ *ö* alternation, as suggested by Jōdaigo jiten henshū iinkai (1967: 105). This word is actually an honorific used for non-relatives, but the use of kin terms as honorifics for non-relatives is cross-linguistically common (e.g. Chinese, Korean, Japanese, etc.).

余母都比羅佐可 (I: 16). The word *pîra-saka* is surprising, since the semantic spelling of the *Nihon shoki* clearly means ‘flat slope/hill’, and the root *pîra* is indeed well attested in Japanese with the meaning ‘flat’. The same oxymoron is seen in other toponyms such as PÎRA-YAMA ‘flat mountain’ (平山, MYS 9.1715), PÎRA-WOKA ‘flat hill’ (枚岡 *Norito* 394, 比良乎加 *Wamyō ruijushō* Genna VI-V6).

Obviously, all of these instances of *pîra-X* cannot mean ‘flat X’. A quick survey shows that this etymon (usually *çira*<sup>7</sup>) is used in dialects all over Japan to designate the slope or side of a mountain or of a hill, a hill, a plateau, or a cliff. Turning to the Ryukyuan languages, the same meanings are attested for this etymon, and a PR form *\*pîra* (A), and PJ *\*pîra* 2.1/2, can be reconstructed from the following forms: Yamatohama *çira* ‘road over a mountain pass’, Kamikatetsu *çirá* ‘slope at the top of a mountain’, Yoron *pja:*, Izena *φírá:*, Nakijin *pʔjá:*, Shuri *φírà*, Ishigaki *pʰisá* ‘slope’, Taketomi *picə* ‘slope (of a roof)’.

Nevertheless, the relationship with *\*pîra* ‘flat’ cannot be easily eluded since the two are homophonous and share the same tone category: Yamatohama *çira-sari*, Yoron *pja:-saj*, Izena *φírá-há:ŋ*, Shuri *φírá-hàŋ*, Ishigaki *pʰisá-sà:ŋ*, Taketomi *picə-səŋ*. The relationship between ‘hill, slope’ and ‘flat’ is not obvious, but I propose that ‘flat’ is the original meaning of *\*pîra* and that the sense ‘hill, slope’ is a secondary development through ‘mountain pass, plateau’.

A mountain pass is a less steep and lower road between two slopes, hence the extension of *\*pîra* ‘flat’ to ‘flat place (along a mountain road)’. The derivation ‘flat’ > ‘plateau’ is also a natural one. The subsequent extension to ‘slope’, ‘hill’, ‘hill or mountain side’, ‘cliff’ is easily understood as these are what naturally surround a mountain pass or a plateau. A typological parallel can be found in the relationship of Bulgarian планина, Czech *planina* and Serbo-Croatian *planina* ‘mountain’ with Latin *plānus* ‘plain, flat’ (Buck 1949: 28).

This reconstructed meaning agrees well with the symbolic value of *pîra-saka* in the Japanese myth. Like a mountain pass is a pathway between two mountains or valleys, *pîra-saka* represents the border and pathway between the world of the living and that of the dead, and it is made impossible to freely pass through by Izanagi precisely when the two divinities put in motion the cycle of life and death for humans.

Interestingly, Ainu has a word *pîra* meaning ‘cliff’, and also a verb *pîrasa* ‘to spread out’. The phonological and semantic match with Japonic *\*pîra* is perfect and could hardly be a coincidence. The Japonic word might also be compared to Middle Korean (МК) *pilé* ~ *piléy* ‘cliff, bank’, for which it might be a better

7 Some dialects exhibit a form *hera* instead, which might be related to the toponym *pêra-saka* 幣羅坂 mentioned in the *Kojiki* (I: 182). However, the Ryukyuan evidence clearly points to earlier *\*i* and not *\*e* in the first syllable.

match than OJ *pê* ‘edge, bank, vicinity’ (Whitman 1985: 151).

This etymology also illuminates another passage of the *Kojiki*, where the goddess Amaterasu is depicted as ‘attaching a five-hundred-arrow quiver to [her] *pîra*’ (比良邇者附五百入之鞞, 1: 74). Commentators do not agree on the meaning of this *pîra*, but it most probably means here ‘flank’ and is thus related to the gloss *fira* 2.2 for 方 ‘side’ in the *Ruiju myōgishō* (Kanchiin Sō-chū: v18).<sup>8</sup> The same meaning ‘side, direction, vicinity’ is attested in many Japanese and Ryukyuan dialects, e.g., Tottori *attci-bira* ‘other there’, Yoron *micci-bja*: ‘North direction’, Yamatohama *hata-çira*, Nakijin *hàtà-ppjá*: ‘one side, one direction’. Further semantic extensions include Ōita *kawa-n-hera* ‘river shore’ or Hachijō *çira* ‘border of a hearth, hearthside’. The semantic path is here ‘flat’ > ‘surface, face’ > ‘flank, side’ > ‘direction, vicinity’ and is partly paralleled by the evolution of Latin *costa* ‘rib, side’ and related words into French *côte* ‘coast, seashore, slope’, *coteau* ‘small hill’ or *côté* ‘side, along, vicinity’.

There are also deeper implications for the reconstruction of earlier Japanese: compounds of the type *pîra-X*, such as *pîra-saka*, *pîra-yama*, *pîra-woka*, do not mean ‘flat *X*’ and are thus not of the modifier-head type (†[Adj [N]]). The element *pîra* is a noun meaning ‘pass, side’ modified by the following noun which restricts its denotation (‘pass or side of *X*; [[N] N]). This also explains how Izanagi managed to block the *pîra-saka* of the land of the dead: it was not a *saka*, a slope or hill, but a *pîra*, a pass.

Such compounds thus have a head-modifier structure, which is unexpected since all Japonic languages are consistently head-final. Considering also that OJ has a system of prefixes, which is uncommon for a verb-final language, this disharmony could suggest the possibility that pre-OJ underwent some important syntactic changes. This resonates with some recent work on alignment and word order in OJ (Vovin 2009: 589, 661, 1055–1056, Yanagida & Whitman 2009).

### 3 Revisiting some Koreo-Japonic comparisons

The seminal dissertation of Whitman (1985) remains the most thorough work on the genetic comparison of Korean and Japanese. It presents a corpus of more than 300 morphological and lexical comparisons supported by a set of detailed sound correspondences, amended in Frellesvig & Whitman (2008a)

8 The character 鞞 usually stands for *yukî*, a quiver traditionally worn on the back, but since Amaterasu is said to already have a thousand-arrow quiver on her back (負千入之鞞) and since the five-hundred-arrow quiver is said to be ‘attached’ (附), in contrast to the first one which is explicitly said to be ‘worn on her back’ (負), it is reasonable to assume that she wore the second quiver on her side.

and Whitman (2012). Vovin (2010) tackles the painstaking task of reviewing every comparison proposed by Whitman (1985) and rejects most of them as being probable borrowings or chance resemblances. A reexamination of every proposed etymology is far beyond the scope of this contribution,<sup>9</sup> but I wish to offer some comparative perspectives from a Ryukyuanist point of view.

One of the main methodological principles of Vovin (2010: 6) is that in order to be reconstructed in PJ, an etymon has to be attested in OJ or MJ and Southern Ryukyuan, or in Ryukyuan and a non-Central Japanese dialect. From this follows that any Koreo-Japonic comparison without a (Southern) Ryukyuan cognate is likely to be a loan from Korean to Japanese.<sup>10</sup>

I will adduce below Ryukyuan comparanda for several comparisons rejected by Vovin.<sup>11</sup> It might thus be possible to retrieve some of the Koreo-Japonic comparisons proposed by Whitman (1985), provided that they do not pose other problems than their lack of attestation in Ryukyuan. I will nevertheless remain agnostic as to their interpretation. In other words, my aim is to show that the following words need to be reconstructed at the PJ level, but whether they constitute cognates, borrowings or chance similarities with Korean remains to be discussed.

### 3.1 *Morning*

The comparison OJ *asa* :: МК *àchóm* ‘morning’ (Whitman 1985: 244, #321) is known since at least Polivanov (1891–1938), but seems to lack Ryukyuan cognates at first sight (Vovin 2010: 224). Indeed, the usual word for ‘morning’ in virtually every Ryukyuan variety is not related to *asa*: Shodon *sika:ma*, Okazen *èitímú:tì*, Yoron *èikámà*, Nakijin *èitímítì*, Shuri *sútúmítì*, Ōgami *stumutì*, Ishigaki *sitúmúdí*, Yonaguni *t’ùmútì*.

Still, a cognate of *asa* can be found in many compounds, which more often than not do not exist as such in Japanese and thus cannot be loanwords: Yamatohama *?asa-çikjari* ‘glow in the morning sky’, *?asa-sikama* ‘early morning’, *?asa-t<sup>h</sup>eda* ‘morning sun’, Shodon *?asa:jihə*: ‘glow in the morning sky’, Yoron *àsá-eù* ‘morning tide’, Izena *?àsà-ùí* ‘morning rain’, *?ásá-ùtài* ‘morning fatigue’, *?ásá-zúri* ‘morning meeting’, Nakijin *hàsà-ní* ‘morning sleep’, *hàsà-téjù* ‘morning

9 See Whitman (2012) for a response on some etymologies.

10 I will not discuss the potential problems of this approach in the case of a family like Japonic, where there are only two main branches, but accept it as valid for the sake of the discussion.

11 I will restrict myself to etyma well attested in Ryukyuan and will not address intriguing but isolated attestations such as *wat<sup>h</sup>a-ganaci* ‘sea god’ (Yamatohama), which might be added to the comparison OJ *wata* ‘sea’ :: МК *pàtáh* ~ *pàlól* ‘id.’ (Whitman 1985: 213, Vovin 2010: 111).

dew', Ie-jima *ʔásá-úki* 'early rising', *ʔásá-gánnjái* 'morning thunder', *ʔásá-dúri* 'morning calm', Shuri *ʔásá-gúmúú* 'cloudy morning', *ʔásá-dátéi* 'early morning', Ōgami *asa-munu* 'breakfast', Ishigaki *ásá-útsí* 'during the morning', *ásá-páná* 'early morning', *ásá-bìrì* 'morning defecation', Taketomi *əsə-uzumi* 'morning rising', *əsə-tui* 'morning rooster', *əsə-nijgəi* 'morning prayer', Yonaguni *asadusaj* 'morning and evening'.

It is thus possible to reconstruct PR *\*asa* B, and PJ *\*asa* 2.5b 'morning' from the comparison with Japanese *asa* 2.5.

### 3.2 *Body*

The comparison of OJ *mu-* ~ *mī* 'body' with МК *mwóm* 'id.' (Whitman 1985: 237, #259) is well known and is one of the core etymologies of Korea-Japonic comparative studies. It is nevertheless rejected by Vovin (2010: 194) on the sole basis of its lack of attestation in Ryukyuan.

However, as already noticed by Whitman (2012: 32), a cognate is attested in Ryukyuan as a pronoun. Whitman quotes the Nakijin form *ʔàgá:mì* 'we', to which we can add Yoron *mĩ* 'self. Such examples parallel the grammaticalization of OJ *mī* into Early Middle Japanese *wagami* 'I, he, himself' and *mi* 'I'.

Even clearer, non-grammaticalized cognates are also found, with the meaning 'edible flesh of fish and other animals, especially the muscular tissue, edible part of seashells and sea urchins, human flesh', 'pulp, flesh of fruits, fruit', and by extension 'substantial, solid ingredient in a soup': Yamatohama *mú* 'fruit, flesh', Yuwan *mí* 'flesh of seashells', Shodon *mû* 'fruit, flesh', Okazen *mú* 'fruit, flesh', Izena *mí* 'fruit, flesh', Shuri *mû* 'fruit, content', Ōgami *miuu* 'meat, flesh', Ishigaki *mû* 'flesh, fruit, ingredient', Taketomi *mí* 'ingredient, meat, body', Yonaguni *mú* 'flesh, ingredient'.

The reconstruction of PR *\*mi* A 'body, flesh, meat' and its comparison with Japanese *mu-* ~ *mī* 1.1 'body' is rather straightforward. Though the two are traditionally thought to be distinct words, this is clearly the same word as OJ *mī* 'fruit, seed, kernel, pulp', which also belongs to class 1.1. We thus need to reconstruct only one PJ word here: *\*mui* 1.1 'body, flesh, meat, soft tissue underneath the skin or shell of animals and fruits'.

### 3.3 *Origin*

The comparison of OJ *mötö* 'base, bottom, root' with МК *míth* 'id.' (Whitman 1985: 240, #278) is argued by Vovin (2010: 202) to be a Korean loan, in spite of its existence in Ryukyuan as a classifier.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> I rather take the existence of this classifier as evidence for the antiquity of this etymon in Ryukyuan and Japonic.



It is nevertheless possible to find several varieties which have an independent cognate form: Yamatohama *mutu* ‘origin’, Yuwan *mutu* ‘root of vegetables’, Okazen *mù:tú* ‘origin’, Yoron *mútú* ‘origin, classifier for plants’, Izena *mù:tú* ‘origin’, Nakijin *mútú* ‘origin’, Ie-jima *mútú* ‘origin, root, trunk’, Shuri *mútú* ‘origin’, Ikema *mutu* ‘origin’, Ōgami *mutu* ‘stem’, Ishigaki *mútú* ‘origin’, Taketomi *mútú* ‘origin, trunk’, Yonaguni *mùtú* ‘origin’

I thus reconstruct PR *\*moto* C as a cognate of Japanese *mōtō* 2.3?, and PJ *\*matə* 2.3a ‘base, root, origin’.

### 3.4 *Darkness*

The comparison of OJ *yami* ‘darkness’ with МК *cyèmúl-*, *cyémkúl* ‘(day) comes to a close, gets dark’ (Whitman 1985: 232, #199) is rejected by Vovin (2010: 169) because of the scarce attestation of this etymon in Ryukyuan and of other irregularities.

However, regular cognates of OJ *yami* can be found in all branches of Ryukyuan, though sometimes in compounds only: Yamatohama *jami*, Okazen *jàmi*, Nakijin *k’ùrà:-jàmi*, Shuri *jámí*, Ōgami *ffa-jam*, Ishigaki *jámì* ‘darkness’, Yoron *ju-jan*, Izena *jàmì-gà-jǔ*, Ie-jima *jú-jáni* ‘dark night’.

I thus propose to reconstruct PR *\*jami* A, and from the comparison with Japanese *yami* 2.3, PJ *\*jam{u,o}i* 2.3b ‘darkness’.

### 3.5 *Seaweed*

The comparison of OJ *mo* ~ *më* ‘seaweed’ with МК *mól* ‘edible seaweed’ (Whitman 1985: 237, #253, Vovin 2010: 193) cannot be rejected as a late loan on the basis that this word has no cognate in Ryukyuan.

This etymon is actually well attested in both Northern and Southern Ryukyuan: Yamatohama *mu*, Yuwan *mu*, Shodon *mô*: Okazen *mú*, Izena *mó*, Nakijin *mó*, Ie-jima *mô*, Shuri *mú*, Ōgami *mu*, Ishigaki *mô*.<sup>13</sup>

We can thus reconstruct a PR form *\*mo* A, and from this a form *\*m{o,ə}* 1.2 ‘seaweed’ at the PJ level.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The vowel *o* found in some varieties is irregular, but the tonal correspondence is perfect.

<sup>14</sup> See also Antonov (this volume).

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