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# Disentangling Japonic *seaweed* from Koreano-Japonic *water*

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As is undoubtedly the case with many other researchers working on Korean and Japanese with a particular interest in their history and possible relationship, Professor Whitman's seminal work (Whitman 1985) on the comparison of these two languages has been a source of inspiration and an example of how one should go about looking for the sound laws that would eventually prove the existence of the (still) hypothetical Koreano-Japonic language family.

Even though his was not the first work on this difficult subject, it still stands out as one which until recently was the most systematic and firmly grounded in the Comparative Method. Indeed, Professor Vovin's recent monograph on the subject (Vovin 2010) has benefited from major developments in our understanding of the history of both Koreanic and Japonic, but it still harks back to Professor Whitman's major endeavour in this area almost thirty years ago as it presents a point-by-point rebuttal of all but six of the 352 etymologies proposed therein (Whitman 1985: 209-246). Since in the end Vovin (2010: 238-40) comes close to denying the probability of ever being able to prove these two languages to be related, I think one could claim that Whitman (2012) is a major improvement on Whitman (1985) inasmuch as it tries to present a better case for Koreano-Japonic while addressing some of the criticisms in Vovin (2010).

This is hardly the place to review all the etymologies Vovin (2010) rejects and to discuss the well-foundedness of his arguments. Such an enterprise could indeed only be undertaken in a similar monographic format. Neither will I attempt to evaluate the new proposals put forward by Whitman (2012).

Instead, I will try to take a fresh look at some of the comparisons and propose a new etymology.

## 1 WATER

Frellesvig and Whitman (2008: 35) reconstruct two central vowels in proto-Japanese (namely *ɨ and *ə) mainly on the basis of two sets of correspondences in which Old Japanese $o_2$ (usually assumed to reflect pre-OJ *ə) corresponds either to Middle Korean *u* or to MK *o*. Still, given that the examples adduced are phonologically extremely similar and the fact that there is at times considerable semantic latitude in their meanings ('wh(at)' vs. 'conjectural adverb' [=if]; 'fly' vs. 'ride'; 'eldest, chief (of kin)' vs. 'base, origin'), we may be dealing with accidental lookalikes in some cases, and with loanwords in others. Indeed, the fact that MK *koWol*(*h*) 'county' :: OJ *kopori* is one of the items compared strongly supports this latter hypothesis for at least some of them.

So why not consider that this correspondence is one which is only found in loanwords? If we do this, then we would have to conclude that all of the other comparanda, among which 'fire', 'seaweed', 'snake' and 'boat/prow', are loanwords, presumably from Koreanic.

I think this may well be the case of the words for 'snake' and 'boat', but the case of the word for 'fire' is a little bit more complicated. Vovin (2011) and Pellard (2013) have independently shown that the Japonic word for 'fire' was *poy, and consequently the possibility of its being cognate with MK *púl* 'id.' has been *de facto* denied.

In defense of this comparison Whitman (2012: 32) rejects the Japonic reconstruction on the ground that the philological evidence for Old Japanese $po_1$ instead of $po_2$ in this particular word is disputable, but in doing this he overlooks the fact that the Japonic reconstruction relies on data from both Eastern Old Japanese and Ryukyuan and therefore rests on firm ground.

Now, the obvious conclusion would be to say that the words for 'fire' in Japonic and Koreanic are simply not cognate. *İt ürür, kervan yürür*, as the saying goes.

Still, I think that we could approach the vowel mismatch problem from a different perspective. We could say that these words are indeed cognate, and that the correspondence they exhibit—MK *u*(*l*) :: pJR *o(y) with yodization—is one diagnostical of true cognates. This has the merit of not being an obvious correspondence, and certainly not one we would expect to find in loanwords.

Another advantage is that we can now tentatively rescue a few more comparisons.

MK *tul-* 'hold, lift' would now correspond regularly to OJ *to*$_1$*r-* 'id.', whereas its correspondence with OJ *to*$_2$*r-* would be of the loanword type, thus incidentally waiving aside Vovin (2010: 122)'s qualms about this comparison.

The same would be true of MK *múl* 'water' :: OJ *mi*$_1$ 'id', even if here the story is a bit more complex. Indeed, by applying the correspondence MK *u*(*l*) :: pJR *o(y), we would expect MK *múl* to correspond to pJR *mo(y), whereas the current reconstruction is pJR *me. This could actually be accounted for if we assume that *me is actually an ablaut variant of *mo(y), just as seems to be the case of the (initial in the) Japonic words for 'stone' (pJR *esoy ~*osoy [> EOJ *osu/i*]) and 'breath' (pJR *eki ~*oki [> EOJ *oki*$_1$]). Ablaut variation in Japonic has been rejected by Vovin (2010: 7), but the argument against it that he adduces, the accentual difference between the alternants, is also applicable to Indo-European (where the existence of ablaut can hardly be questioned) and is in fact definitional of the phenomenon. Thus, the examples of it that do exist in Japonic need to be further researched.

If we accept the existence of pJR *mo(y) 'water' (whose final yod was lost as it only survived in compounds) with an ablaut variant pJR *me and thus cognate with MK *múl* 'id.' one obvious question would be whether it is attested as such in Japonic.

I think that the answer is yes. I would like to argue that the OJ word *mopi*$_{(1)}$ which appears in the Japanese reading of the name of the Water Office (主水司 *mopitori no tukasa*) of the Ministry of the Imperial Household (宮内省 *kunaishō*) under the 律令 Ritsuryō system whose members were in charge of water, rice gruel and ice supply (Omodaka and al. 1967: 747) is actually a compound consisting of the words *mo* 'water' and *pi*$_1$ 'ice'. Even though the second member of this compound is phonetically attested only in the compound 宇須良婢 *usura-bi*$_1$ 'thin ice' in volume 20 of the *Man'yōshū* (song 4478), its use as a kungana for (*kō-rui*) *pi*$_1$ is well-attested.

The word *mopi*$_1$ is phonographically attested in the OJ corpus with the meaning of 'water vessel' and (by extension?) 'water' (Omodaka and al. 1967: 747) but I would suggest that these are secondary meanings which developed once *mopi*$_1$ was no longer transparent as a compound, and was reanalyzed as the name of the vessel used to fetch the water (and the ice) and ultimately as a word for water as well. Unfortunately, this word seems to have left no trace whatsoever in any modern dialect or any Ryukyuan language.

## 2 SEAWEED

Let us consider next MK *mól* 'seaweed'. This word has been compared by Whitman (1985: 237, #253) to OJ $mo_{(2)}$ ~ $me_2$ and although with a different theory on the vowel correspondence in Frellesvig and Whitman (2008: 35) and Whitman (2012: 30). It has been rejected by Vovin (2010: 193) as a Koreanic loanword because of irregular vowel correspondence as per Whitman (1985: 129).

Once again the story may be a bit more complex.

While it is true that if as suggested MK *o* :: OJ $o_2$ (< *ə) reflects a loanword correspondence this comparison should be discarded from the list of potential cognates, it is actually not certain that the vowel of OJ *mo* 'seaweed' was originally an *otsu-rui* one, i. e. $mo_2$. Indeed, the only phonographic attestation of this word in Western Old Japanese, and one which could allow us to determine the quality of its vowel (*pace* Vovin 2010: 193), is its occurrence in the *Norito* liturgies, where it is noted with a *kō-rui* vowel, i. e. as $mo_1$. Given that the ratio of etymologically correct spellings of the syllable *mo* in these texts is extremely high (Bentley 2001: 35) we can safely assume that this was the original vowel of the Japonic word for 'seaweed'.

Interestingly, we cannot really be sure that the vowel of the 'alternant' form $me_2$ is an *otsu-rui* vowel either, since it is not unequivocally attested in phonograms in Western Old Japanese (*contra* Omodaka and al. 1967: 732) and it is not attested in any Ryukyuan language outside of cases of obvious borrowing from mainland Japanese. Furthermore, given that the distribution of these two presumably apophonic forms, i. e. *mo* (which should be the bound form if from earlier *mə) and *me* (which should be the independent one if from earlier *məy), does not correspond to the one generally expected in the case of bound vs. independent forms, we should consider the possibility of having to do with yet another case of ablaut variants.

Now *two's company, three's a crowd*. We would not want to multiply *ad infinitum* this type of variation especially since we are dealing with two phonologically identical words, and so instead of positing that what we have here are two homophones which happen to mean respectively 'water' and 'seaweed', and have *e ~ *o ablaut variants, it might be better to assume that we are actually dealing with a single etymon and that the word for 'seaweed' is derived from the word for 'water'.

And indeed, the *Norito* text preserves what may well be the original form of the word as 毛波 $mo_1pa$, which could be analyzed as 'water-leaves'. This word is also attested in Song 4 of the *Nihon shoki* as 茂播 and is still present in a number of modern dialects as *moba* with expected *rendaku* in a *tatpu-*

*ruṣa* compound (Kitahara 2001-2, online edition). It is remarkably parallel to the Slavic (Russian *водоросли* Bielorussian *водарасці*, Bulgarian *водорасли*), Turkic (Turkish *su yosunları*, Tatar *сусемнәр*) and possibly Estonian *vetikad* (from *vesi* 'water' and a denominal adjectival suffix *-kas*) words for 'seaweed' which literally translates as 'water plants'. Given that *mogusa* 'water grass' is another ancient way of referring to seaweed (Omodaka and al. 1967: 737), this seems to be one satisfying way of accounting for all these forms.

Of course, even if one does not agree with the analysis of the origin of OJ *mo* 'seaweed' as an apocopated version of (pre-)OJ $mo_1pa$ just presented, OJ $mo_1$ (from pJR *mo(y) with apocopated final yod) would not correspond regularly to MK *mól* according to Whitman (2012: 30)'s new vowel correspondences and would thus count as a loanword from his viewpoint, as according to him MK *o* comes from OK *ə and should correspond to pJR *ə, not pJR *o.

But if the vowel correspondence he has put forward is taken to be diagnostical of loanwords as proposed above, pJR *mo(y) (with subsequent loss of the yod) could actually be cognate with MK *mól*, with no need of positing that its reflex OJ $mo_1$ comes from an earlier *ua diphthong and therefore appealing to Whitman's law of medial *r* loss (cf. Whitman 1985: 189-208, Whitman 1990), which would derive OJ $mo_1$ from earlier *mura > *mua > *mwa > $mo_1$ and ultimately from pJK *mol (Whitman 1985: 237), presumably by way of pre-OJ *mur (Whitman 1985: 144).

Therefore, if what we originally had in Japonic was a compound based on the Japonic reflex of the proto-Koreano-Japonic word for 'water' and the Japonic word for 'leaf' (i. e. *mopa*) as suggested above, we would have to assume that *mo* 'seaweed' (with no *kō-otsu* distinction in the vowel) was in fact either the apocopated version of *mopa* and so etymologically a(n ablaut) variant of the word for 'water' or else that it is cognate with MK *mól*.

In the latter case we must assume that there were in (pre-) Old Japanese (and really, in Japonic) two competing words for 'seaweed', a transparent compound ('water leaves') and a specialized word, both having cognates in Koreanic, as the word for 'water' in the former, and the word for 'seaweed' in the latter case. This last one ended up as the only survivor in later stages of the Japonic languages as it is well attested in Ryukyuan (see Pellard, this volume).

But since we also have to account for the variant *me* if with an *otsu-rui* vowel, i. e. $me_2$, one final possibility, of course, would be that *mo* as the word for 'seaweed' is the result of reanalysis of $mo_1pa$ 'water leaves' as being based upon MK *mól* 'seaweed' which was in fact borrowed at a later (than the hypothetical pJK language) date from Korean as *məy which would incidentally explain its non-attestation in Ryukyuan.

## 3 OUTSTANDING PROBLEMS

I have tried to argue in this short paper that loanwords, and the regular correspondences they may exhibit, are to be taken far more seriously in the study of the relationship between Japonic and Koreanic. I think that if these languages are related, the sound correspondences they may present will most probably not be trivial, a point I have tentatively illustrated with the words for 'water' and 'seaweed'.

I thus believe that our future work on the putative relationship between these two languages will be far easier once we have identified all the obvious loanword sound correspondences and taken them out of the picture so we could concentrate on those (if there are any left) words exhibiting non-trivial sound correspondences.

From this perspective, Whitman (2012) is a welcome improvement in that some of the etymologies proposed show non-trivial correspondences which take into account historical sound changes posited for both languages.

But we still have a lot of work ahead.

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