

Did (some) Eastern Old Japanese survive to this day? A few reflections on the morphology of some Eastern Japanese ‘language islands’

Although they are separated by ca. 400 km of forests, mountains and sea, two small varieties¹ of Japanese exhibit a striking grammatical similarity. Namely, while most Japanese dialects have lost the distinction between attributive and conclusive forms of verbs and adjectives (連体形 *rentaikei* / 終止形 *shūshikei*), they are still distinct in: (NITTA, 2008: 56-57)

1. *tacu* “[I] stand”, but *tato-doci* “when [I] stand”
jama=ga ta:kæ: “the mountain is tall”, but *ta:kake jama* “a tall mountain”
2. *tacu* “[I] stand”, but *tato-toki* “when [I] stand”
jama=ga takakja “the mountain is tall”, but *takake jama* “a tall mountain”

(1.) is the Akiyamagō dialect, spoken in the small eponymous village of the Nagano prefecture, and (2.) is the Hachijō language, spoken on a couple of islands in the south of the Izu archipelago (Tokyo Metropolis). Both are commonly considered to be ‘language islands’, meaning that they are strongly divergent from all neighbouring varieties, and are thus hard to classify.

As a matter of fact, this morphological pattern is not found in any Japanese variety near Akiyamagō (MASE: 2002: 18-19), or Hachijō (ŌSHIMA, 1984: 261-268). In addition, it does not resemble the Old Japanese pattern either, since we have in OJ:

3. 奈美...多都 *namyi tatu* “the waves rise” (MYS 15.846)
可須美多都...卑 *kasumyi tatu pyi* “the day when mist rises” (MYS 5.846)
於等多可之 *oto takasi* “the sound is high” (MYS 17.4006)
多可吉多知夜麻 *takakyi tatijama* “the tall *Tatijama*” (MYS 17.4003)

Rather, the attributive forms of those varieties have been compared with *-o* and *-ke* attributives found in Eastern Old Japanese, an extinct language attested in parts of the *Man'yōshū*, such as:

4. 多刀都久 *tato-tuku* “rising moon” (MYS 14.3476)
可奈之家兒 *kanasi-kye kwo* “dear girl” (MYS 14.3564) (**taka-kye* is unattested)

This similarity has long been noted, and is generally explained as an archaism that would have been preserved in Hachijō and Akiyamagō, thanks to their relative isolation from the rest of Japan. If proved true, it would be a remarkable archaism, since those EOJ forms are themselves considered less innovative than their western counterparts (VOVIN, 2020: 416; 564-565). This explanation also serves as the strongest argument for the putative classification of Hachijō as the living descendant of Eastern Old Japanese (KUPCHIK, 2011: 7-9).

However, when taking a closer look on this phenomenon, we can observe that the picture might be a bit more complicated. Indeed, both the Akiyamagō (MASE, 2002) and Hachijō (KANEDA, 2001) systems also feature various irregularities and innovations, that do not fit in the table of (1.) and (2.), and that make it difficult to consider them as direct cognates, or as mere results of the EOJ system. In addition, comparison with other varieties might also be relevant, especially with the Toshima dialect (spoken on an island roughly 160 km north of Hachijō), as it also features a comparable phenomenon but only in the verbal morphology. Finally, a closer look at EOJ is also needed, as *-ke* and *-o* attributives were not the only forms of attributive in EOJ, and were in fact not even the most common forms of attributives in the 8th century (KUPCHIK, 2011: 618-625; 689-699).

Thus, this presentation will first be dedicated to the synchronic comparison of the attributive forms of verbs and adjectives in Hachijō, Akiyamagō and Toshima. Then, through comparison with EOJ, we will try to investigate the origin and evolution of these forms and to assess to what extent we can consider them (or not) to be remnants of Eastern Old Japanese.

¹ While Akiyama-gō is usually considered a dialect of Japanese, Hachijō is, depending on the perspective, either considered a dialect or an independent language (IANNUCCI, 2019). Thus, we will use the broader term ‘variety’.

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