

Is Hachijō a living descendant of Eastern Old Japanese?

Étienne Baudel – CRLAO / EHESS (Paris) – etienne.baudel@gmail.com

Short abstract:

Hachijō is an endangered Japonic variety, spoken in the south of the Izu islands. While it is often considered a descendant of Eastern Old Japanese, other estimate that there is not enough evidence yet for its classification. This talk aims at examining arguments for and against this hypothesis.

Long abstract:

Hachijō (locally simply called 島言葉 *Shima-kotoba* ‘island speech’) is an endangered minority language of Japan, originally spoken in some of the southern Izu islands (primarily Hachijōjima, Kojima and Aogashima). Like most Japonic varieties, it was long considered one of many dialects of Japanese, but it tends nowadays to be rather described as a separate language having itself several dialects (Iannucci, 2019).

Though traditionally unwritten, Hachijō does have rich literary oral traditions (including folk songs, poems, theatre plays, folktales, prayer, proverbs, riddles, etc.), and has been documented and intensively commented at least since the late Edo period. It was also included in 2009 in the online version of UNESCO’s *Atlas of the world’s languages in danger* (Moseley, 2009), alongside Ainu and six of the Ryukyuan languages.

The classification of Hachijō within Japonic has been a matter of discussion since at least the early 20th century (see for instance Tachibana and Tōjō, 1934).

Early on, Hachijō has been compared with the Eastern dialects of Old Japanese (EOJ) attested in the *Man’yōshū*, based on several phonological, morphological and lexical similarities already noted by Dickins and Satow (1878: 464). Because of these similarities, Hachijō is still often considered to be a living descendant of EOJ (see for instance Kupchik, 2011:7).

However, Hachijō was also compared with other Japonic branches, such as north-eastern Japanese dialects (especially Tōhoku, Akiyamagō and Toshima varieties), Kyūshū dialects and Ryukyuan languages; and, based on these comparisons, some specialists estimate that most of the similarities between EOJ and Hachijō are, in fact, mostly due to shared archaism rather than to shared innovation. Thus, according to them, there is not enough evidence yet to assert whether there is a direct genetic relationship between them (see for instance Pellard, 2018:2).

Thus, this talk aims at taking a closer look at the most recent Eastern Old Japanese data (developed most notably by Ikier, 2006; Kupchik 2011 and Vovin 2021) and at the most recent Hachijō data (notably developed by Kaneda, 2001; Kibe, 2013; Iannucci, 2019 and Baudel, 2023), in order to examine phonological, morphological and lexical arguments for the classification of Hachijō.