

Reconsidering the classification of Hachijō: A glimpse from historical phonology

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Hachijō (locally simply called 島言葉 *Shima-kotoba* ‘island speech’) is an endangered minority language of Japan, originally spoken in the southern part of the Izu archipelago (primarily on the three islands of Hachijō, Kojima and Aogashima). Like most Japonic varieties, it was long considered a dialect of Japanese; however, the dominant view among specialists is now to treat it as a separate language. Being now critically endangered, Hachijō was included in 2009 in the online version of UNESCO’s *Atlas of the world’s languages in danger* (Moseley, 2009), alongside Ainu and six Ryukyuan languages.

On the other hand, the term ‘Eastern Old Japanese’ (EOJ) serves as collective term to refer to several dialects of Old Japanese that are primarily attested in the *Man’yōshū* (books 14 and 20), and in a few other minor sources (see Vovin, 2021). EOJ is usually considered as a ‘dialect continuum’ (Vovin, 2021:27) within Old Japanese, and, according to some, a few of those dialects might be divergent enough from Western Old Japanese (WOJ) to be considered a ‘separate branch of the Japanese subgroup of the Japonic language family’ (Kupchik, 2011: 6).

The classification of Hachijō within the Japonic language family has been a topic for discussion since at least the beginning of the Meiji period, when several phonological, morphological and lexical similarities were noted (first by Dickins and Satow, 1878: 464) between Hachijō and EOJ. Based on those resemblances, the idea that Hachijō could be a living descendant of EOJ gradually became somewhat widespread, see for instance: Tachibana & Tōjō (1934:45), Hirayama (1965), Hattori (1968), Ōshima (1975:52), Kaneda (2011:154), Kaneda & Holda (2018:1), Kupchik (2011:6; 2016).

According to this interpretation, Hachijō is usually supposed to be the sole descendant of EOJ, which would place it on its own branch within modern Japanese varieties. However, other specialists consider instead that EOJ could also be the mother language of other modern Eastern varieties of Japanese, in addition to Hachijō (see, for instance, de Boer, 2020:28).

Finally, Hachijō was also compared more recently 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, most likely to be 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 descriptions of Eastern Old Japanese data (developed most notably by Kupchik, 2011 and Vovin, 2021) and at the most comprehensive Hachijō data (compiled in Baudel, forthcoming), in order to examine arguments for the classification of Hachijō.

Due to time limitation, this talk will focus solely on arguments from historical phonology, and mostly to the treatment of proto-Japonic vowels and glides.

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