

Proposing a unified writing system for an endangered oral language

- The example of Hachijō

Étienne Baudel – IIIrd International Conference on Revitalisation of Indigenous and Minoritized Languages (Universitat de Girona)

Introduction

Introduction (1) – What is Hachijō?

- Hachijō is a **minority language of Japan**, spoken on several islands in the Pacific:



Distribution of
Hachijō

Introduction (2) – Classification

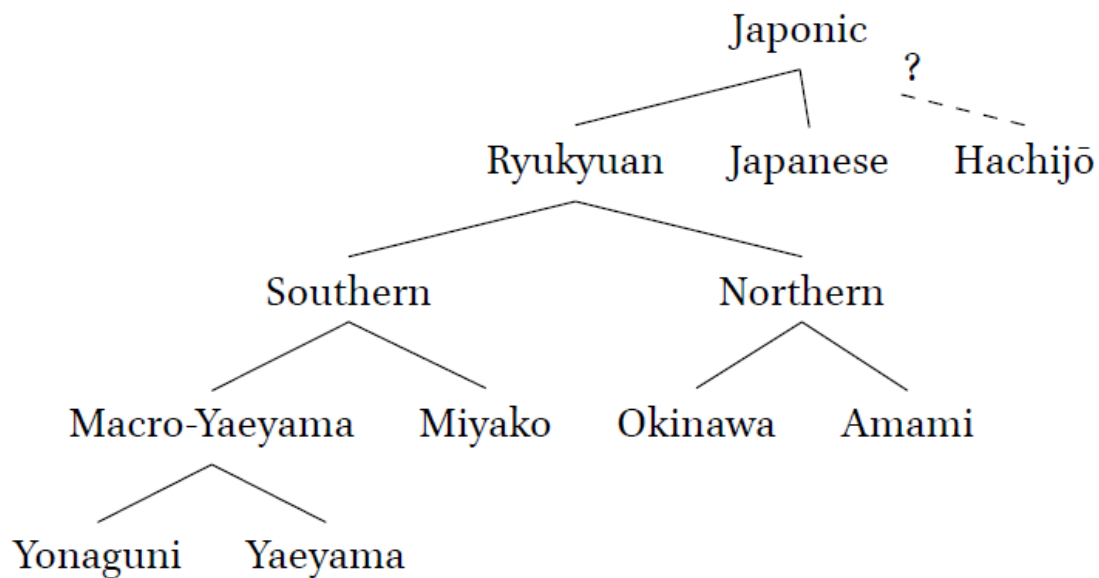
- It belongs to the **Japonic language family** (Japanese: 日琉語族 *nichiryū gozoku*):



Map of the Japonic languages (*Wikimedia*)

Introduction (2) – Classification

- However, its **classification within Japonic is still debated**:



Japonic language
tree proposed by
PELLARD (2018: 2)

Introduction (2) – Classification

- Like other minority languages of Japan, Hachijō was long considered simply a **dialect of Japanese**.
- However, it seems to have **no clear mutual intelligibility** with standard Japanese (IANNUCCI, 2019: 100-106), and even with neighbouring Japanese dialects (HIRAYAMA, 1965).
- Thus, it is now usually considered a **different language** (KANEDA, 2009 & 2013; YAMADA, 2010).

Introduction (3) – Current status

- Hachijō now probably has a **very low number of native speakers** (no census is available).
- Virtually all native speakers are elderly and bilingual, and the transmission of the language is almost non-existent since 1945.
- Thus, it was **included in 2009 in UNESCO's *Atlas of the World's Languages in danger***.

Introduction (3) – Current status

- This threat led to **some recent efforts towards language conservation and revitalisation:**



Kawakami Ayako
reading a Hachijō
folktale
for Youtube

© Hachijō-jima Styles,
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Introduction (3) – Current status

- However, the language is still facing **various issues**, such as:
 - the pervasion of standard Japanese
 - the lack of teaching and of exposure for younger members of the community
 - an overall lack of visibility and accessibility
- **In my opinion, developing a standard writing system for Hachijō could help solve at least some of those problems.**

Introduction (4) – Aim of this presentation

- Indeed, developing a standard writing could help:
 - **increase the accessibility of folk literature** by building a unified corpus
 - **describe the language** by developing a unified dictionary and a reference grammar
 - **develop textbooks** for new learners, and especially children
 - **encourage use in written media**

Introduction (4) – Aim of this presentation

- In this perspective, we also have to tackle the language's variety.
- As stated by WEDEKIND & WEDEKIND (1997: 29-30):

“by agreeing to strengthen a "standard", **the entire language will gain strength**, increase and refine its vocabulary [...].

A "multi-dialect orthography" would [...] help to make more of the existing literature more widely usable.”

Introduction (4) – Aim of this presentation

- Following roughly the steps of orthography creation proposed by WEDEKIND & WEDEKIND (1997: 33), we must proceed through:
 1. analysis & dialect comparison
 2. study of existing orthographies for the language
 3. comparison with other languages
 4. assessment of local opinions and attitude
 5. **orthography conference**
 6. decision on a tentative orthography
 7. testing & modification

Introduction (4) – Aim of this presentation

- Thus, this presentation will aim at studying how to **propose a unified writing system** for Hachijō, following the model given by WEDEKIND & WEDEKIND, and the one given by JAROSZ (2014) about Miyako.
- In order to so, we will:
 - list the qualities we expect from a writing system, and observe Hachijō's specificities within this frame
 - study and compare the various strategies used so far to write Hachijō
 - propose our solution of a united writing system for Hachijō

(1) What do we expect from a writing system?

(1.1) – What do we expect?

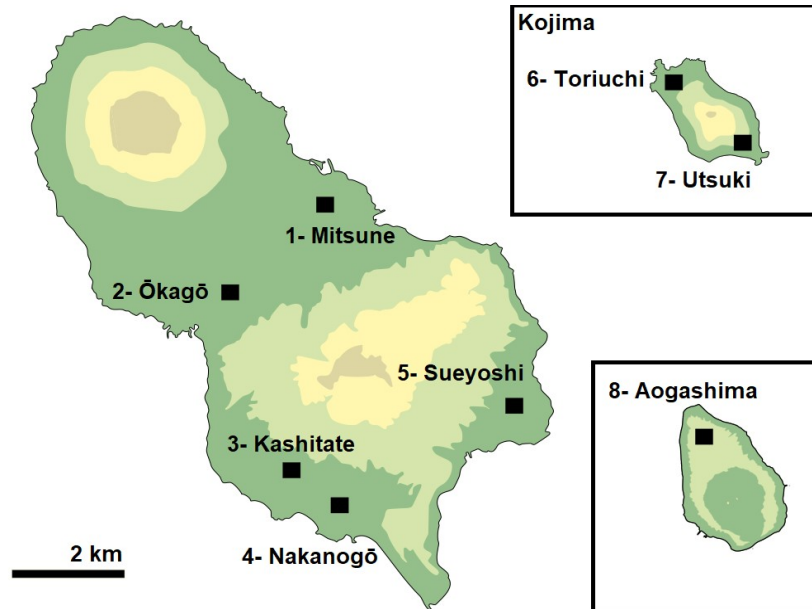
- As stated by WEDEKIND & WEDEKIND (1997), a good writing system must reflect:
 - **phonology** (i.e., ideally 1 phoneme = 1 grapheme)
 - **morphology** when possible (i.e. 1 morpheme = 1 spelling)
 - **practice** (i.e. characters must be available for use)
 - **socio- and psycholinguistics** (i.e. it must match the habits, preferences & expectations of the speaking community):
“the best alphabet is the alphabet which the people like” (p. 31)

(1.2) – What about Hachijō?

- In the case of Hachijō, **the phonology is quite simple** and quite similar to the standard Japanese one.
- Though more complex than standard Japanese, **the morphology is quite regular** as well.
- **Speakers are usually literate in standard Japanese**, and used at least to *hiragana*, *katakana*, *kanji*, and to the Latin alphabet (*rōmaji*).
- However, **it is hard to tell what kind of a system the speakers would favour** in order to write Hachijō.

(1.2) – What about Hachijō?

- However, a possible problem is that **there are at least 8 recorded varieties** of Hachijō:



Map of the Hachijō varieties

(1.2) – What about Hachijō?

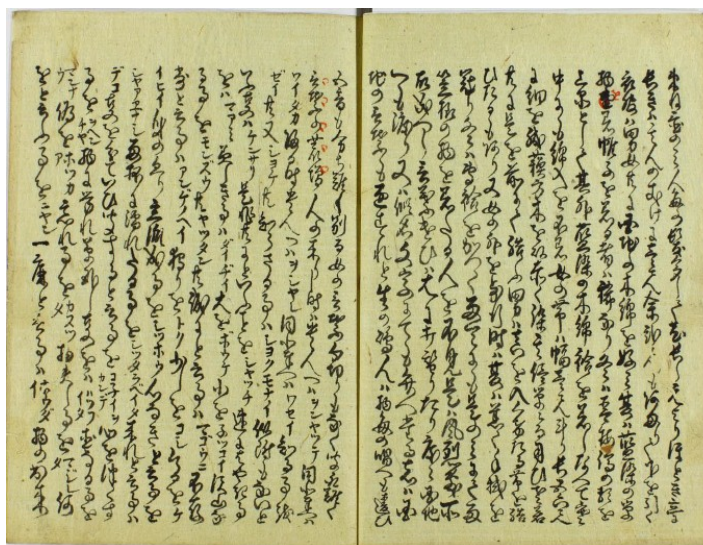
All these varieties have their own phonological peculiarities:

SJ	Aogashima	Toriuchi	Utsuki	Mitsune	Ōkagō	Kashitate	Nakanogō	Sueyoshi
<i>oboeru</i>	ob <u>e</u> :ru	ob <u>e</u> :ru	ob <u>ei</u> ru	ob <u>ei</u> ru	ob <u>ɛ</u> :ru	ob <u>i</u> :ru	ob <u>i</u> :ru	ob <u>i</u> :ru
<i>daikon</i>	d <u>e</u> :ko	d <u>e</u> :ko	d <u>e</u> :ko	d <u>e</u> :ko	d <u>ɛ</u> æko	dʒ <u>i</u> æ:ko	d <u>ɛ</u> æko	d <u>e</u> :ko
<i>hontou</i>	hont <u>o</u> :	hont <u>o</u> :	hont <u>ɑ</u>	hont <u>ɔ</u>	hənt <u>ɔ</u>	hont <u>o</u> :	hont <u>ə</u>	hont <u>o</u> :
<i>kawa</i>	ko:	ko:	ko:	ko:	ko:	ku <u>wa</u> :	k <u>ɔ</u> ɑ	ka:
<i>you</i>	-g <u>o</u> n	-g <u>o</u> n	-g <u>o</u> n	-g <u>o</u> n	-g <u>o</u> n / -g <u>ɔ</u> ʌn	-y ^w <u>a</u> n	-g <u>ɔ</u> ʌn	-g <u>a</u> n

(2) How was Hachijō written so far?

(2.1) – *Katakana*

- The first attestation of Hachijō words seem to have occurred in 1781.
- At that time, Hachijō words were written in *katakana* using **classical Japanese orthography**:



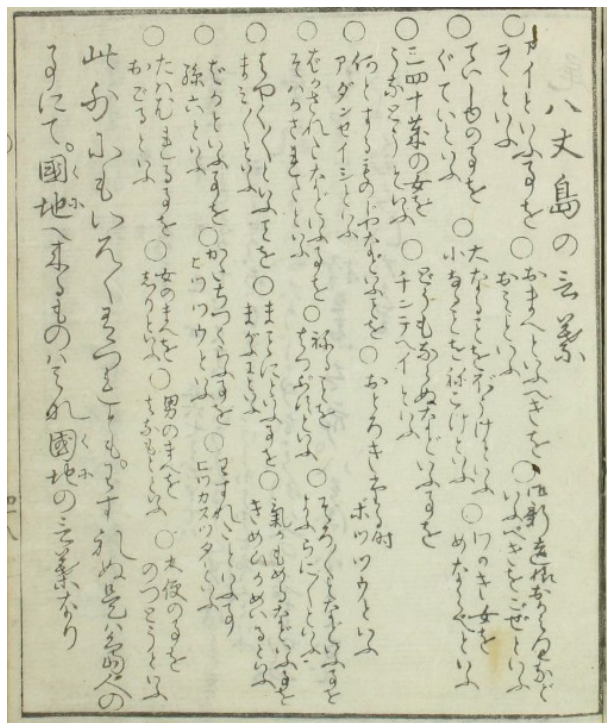
SATŌ Yukinobu,
Izu kaitō fudoki, p. 45

(2.1) – *Katakana*

- *Katakana* are widely used by Japanese linguists to write Hachijō since at least 1900 (HOSHINA, 1900).
- They have the advantage of clearly indicating that the language written is **not** standard Japanese.
- However, *katakana* are usually used to write loanwords, biological species, advertising, onomatopoeia etc.
- Thus, ***katakana* are not perceived by the community as writing normal speech**, and should therefore, in my opinion, not be adopted in a standard spelling.

(2.2) – *Hiragana*

- *Hiragana* have also been used to write down Hachijō since at least 1796:



KODERA Ōsai,
Shichitō nikki, p. 49

(2.2) – Hiragana

- *Hiragana* are the most common way to write down Hachijō, especially in **materials directed to children**:



Hachijō Board of Education, *Shima-kotoba wo hanasō tsutaeyō* (2013), p. 6



Hachijō Board of Education, *Shima-kotoba karuta* (2011)

(2.2) – *Hiragana*

- As such, ***hiragana*** are a **good candidate** for a unified spelling.
- However, a distinct code / spelling that the standard Japanese one is still needed in order to match Hachijō's specificities.

(2.3) – *Kana+kanji*

- There were, as far as I know, **few attempts** to write down Hachijō with a combination of *kana* and *kanji*.
- A notable attempt can be seen the corpus of folktales published by ASANUMA in 1965:

前にたちふさがって、通せんぼをしました。
「貴様は島人を困らせている悪い鬼ときいてまいった。今日はおれが成敗してやるから覚悟しろ！」
と為朝がいいました。これをきいた鬼は、カラカラと笑って、
「あにをぬかす、どこ（おとこ）のヘタメかシヨクナイが、あとで後悔するなヨーイ」
といいながら、むんずとはかり為朝に組みついてきました。
鬼は身体が頑丈で強いし、為朝も七尺ちかい大男で力持ちですから、なかなか勝負がつきません。
「ヨイシヨ、コラシヨ、ドツコイシヨ……」
と二人は、大きいかけ声をかけあいながら、もみあい、へしあいをつづけました。
しかし、そのうち為朝が、鬼を崖のふちに追いつめて、
「アリヤリヤ……アリヤリヤ……アリヤリヤ……」

ASANUMA Ryōji,
Hachijō no minwa (1965),
Oni no ishi

(2.3) – *Kana+kanji*

- **This system seems quite unpractical**, because of the constant need to explicit its differences with the standard Japanese.
- As such, it exposes the readers to a constant **written code-switching**, which, in my opinion, makes it **unsuitable to work as a standard for a minority language**.

(2.4) – *Rōmaji*

- Finally, several influential linguists have attempted to use the Latin script for Hachijō **at least since 1878**:

*“Kori ya, Tarōji dono
Takari anei, o mi tuchi chô
yo hana yo to kawaigatte
bôku itaita nioko dono mo
shitori mae no onago ni
natta gena.*

DICKINS and SATOW, Notes of a
visit to Hachijô (1878), p. 465

*Ware mo tokku ni yoro-
konde kubi kubi to omotte
iru uchi ni, go buyen ni
hinnari môshita. Kori ya,
wa ga Sabôji mo, ammari
hajikamashii koto da ga, o
mimai ni ware yo oppashi-
rakaita.”*

(2.4) – *Rōmaji*

- This system has the advantage of being **very clear phonetically**, and **very flexible to adaptations**.
- However, though it is not uncommon, this system is mostly **used for and by linguists**.
- As far as I know, **it was never properly adapted for being used within the community**.
- As all Hachijō speakers do **not** consider themselves distinct from Japanese, I highly doubt that the community would favour such a system.

(3) My proposition to write Hachijō

(3.1) – What system for Hachijō?

- Due to the community's habits, in my opinion, the best system to write down Hachijō should be based on ***hiragana***.
- **An adapted romanisation** (based on the Hepburn system) can also be used in parallel for linguistic description.
- However, a **multi-dialect orthography** still has to be decided.

(3.2) – Dealing with varieties

I suggest to use **digraphs** to write various realisations of vowel coalescences:

‘Standard’	Aogashima	Toriuchi	Utsuki	Mitsune	Ōkagō	Kashitate	Nakanogō	Sueyoshi
<i>obeiru</i>	ob e :ru	ob e :ru	ob ei ru	ob ei ru	ob ɛ :ru	ob i :ru	ob i :ru	ob i :ru
<i>deako</i>	d e :ko	d e :ko	d e :ko	d e :ko	d eæ ko	dʒ iæ :ko	d ɛæ ko	d e :ko
<i>hontou</i>	hont o :	hont o :	hont ao	hont ou	hənt oʌ	hont o :	hont əu	hont o :
<i>koa</i>	ko o :	ko o :	ko o :	ko o :	ko o :	ku wa :	k oʌ	ka a :
<i>gwan</i>	-go n	-go n	-go n	-go n	-go n / -go ʌ n	-y ^w a n	-g oʌ n	-ga n

(3.2) – Dealing with varieties

- In general, the **digraphs** I propose are **either etymological** (like <ou>, and in some cases <ei>) or **unambiguous** (like <ea> and <oa>).
- In cases where there is **a discrepancy** among the varieties (as in Utsuki $s > ts$, or $r > y / \emptyset$), I suggest to keep an **etymological spelling**:
 - せんせい *sensei* [tʃentʃe:] ‘teacher’ (Mitsune ***sensei***)
 - ぐれあ *gurea* [gwe:] ‘about’ (Mitsune ***gure:***)

(3.3) – Further choices

- Another important decision to take would concern **wording** and **spacing**.
- However, since **this question is not relevant for *hiragana***, but only for romanisation, I will leave it to a further presentation.

(3.4) – An example sentence

Morpho- phonetic	kakomi-kiri= <u>nno:=gon do:</u> φwto:-ke ki=ga arara ttei=ga
Gloss	surround-NOMIN-cut-NOMIN-NEG.ATTR-COMP COP-ATTR tree=SUBJ be-FIN.PAST HEARSAY=ADV
Hiragana	かこみきりん <u>のあぐわんどあ</u> ふとーけきがあららっていが
Rōmaji	kakomi-kirin <u>noagwan doa</u> futōke ki ga arara ttei ga
Kanji+kana	囲みきりん <u>のあぐわんどあ</u> 太け木があららっていが
Katakana	カコミキリン <u>ノアグウンドア</u> フトーケキガアララッテイガ
Translation	There was a tree so wide that [people] could not surround it entirely.

Conclusion

Conclusion

- **A multi-dialect orthography is, in my opinion, not only doable but preferable for Hachijō.**
- Namely, **a unified system based on *hiragana*** could be a very suitable candidate to create a standard writing for Hachijō; while, in parallel, **a standard romanisation** can still be used to help linguistic description.
- During my **future fieldwork in Hachijō and Aogashima** in early 2023, I wish to propose this system to the local community and to modify it according to their preferences.

おかげさまで！

/ Thank you very much!

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