

# Michinori Shimoji *An Introduction to Japonic Languages. Grammatical Sketches of Japanese Dialects and Ryukyuan Languages*

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The term Japonic was coined by Leon Serafim to refer to all language varieties derived from Proto-Japanese. This label was needed to describe a language family encompassing sister languages that undoubtedly shared the same genealogical origin. Through the use of the comparative method, it is possible to state that the languages that split from Proto-Japanese – also often referred to as Proto-Japonic, a language spoken on the island of Kyūshū in the Yayoi period – are Western Old Japanese, from which the language varieties spoken in mainland Japan derive, Eastern Old Japanese, a language attested by some poems of the Man'yōshū, and Proto-Ryukyuan. Language historians have attempted to identify a common genealogical origin shared by Japanese and other language families by using Proto-Japonic forms, which have been reconstructed on the basis of the oldest forms of the attested Japonic languages. So far, then, the term Japonic has almost exclusively been used in the context of



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studies related to historical linguistics. The book *An Introduction to Japonic Languages. Grammatical Sketches of Japanese Dialects and Ryukyuan Languages*, edited by Michinori Shimoji, Associate Professor in Linguistics at Kyushu University, aims to do justice to the complexity and diversity of the linguistic scenario of the Japanese archipelago by offering scholars of linguistic typology an insight into some contemporary Japonic language varieties, i.e. languages derived from Proto-Japonic. Whereas studies of historical linguistics frequently – and justifiably – refer to ancient languages and reconstructed forms, the term Japonic is applied here to contemporary local varieties that share many traits with standard Japanese, yet present their own interesting characteristics from the point of view of typological linguistics. Indeed, the book is mainly addressed to scholars of linguistic typology, who up until now have mainly used samples from standard Japanese as the only point of reference for the Japonic languages. It is therefore a valuable resource for linguists who do not have access to secondary sources written in Japanese, but need reliable and up-to-date data on the characteristics of the languages spoken in the Japanese archipelago.

An original and noteworthy aspect of this book is the juxtaposition of language varieties that are local dialects both of Japanese and Ryukyuan, as mentioned in the introductory chapter. Although ‘Ryukyuan’ is used here as an umbrella term to describe the continuum of mutual intelligibility that stretches across the Ryūkyū archipelago, Ryukyuan is not a language in the same sense as Japanese. In 2009, in the *Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger*, UNESCO reported six endangered Ryukyuan languages, from north to south: Amami, Kunigami, Okinawa, Miyako, Yaeyama, and Yonaguni. However, what Shimoji’s book describes are not these six ‘Ryukyuan languages’, but local varieties from certain islands and villages. The segmentation into six languages may be considered an over-simplification, since those language varieties which did not have any roof language were grouped according to their structural features and geographical proximity. In the present book, this generalisation is overcome and the language varieties found on small islands such as Tokunoshima (chapter 2) and Iheya (chapter 3), as well as in villages such as Kin (chapter 4), Aragusuku (chapter 5) and Shiraho (chapter 6), are described as separate language systems with their own characteristics and structures. In the Ryukyuan archipelago, it cannot be assumed that mutual intelligibility exists between language varieties spoken on neighbouring islands or even between varieties spoken in different villages on the same island. For example, the variety spoken in the village of Shiraho, on the island of Ishigaki, is not perfectly intelligible to speakers from neighbouring villages, since Shiraho was formed as a result of a massive migration from the island of Hateruma in the eighteenth century, partly due to a tsuna-

mi that had destroyed the previous community. The UNESCO classification is also overcome in the chapter on the spoken variety of Iheya, which is not treated as a dialect of the Kunigami language, but rather as a language variety of the Okinawan subgroup. On the same level as the Ryukyuan language varieties, the systems of four language varieties spoken in mainland Japan are described here as dialects of Japanese: the Nambu variety of Aomori Prefecture (chapter 7), the Izumo variety of Shimane Prefecture (chapter 8), and the Yanagawa (chapter 9) and Shiiba (chapter 10) varieties, both spoken on the island of Kyūshū. These four local varieties are part of the continuum of mutual intelligibility that stretches across mainland Japan, from north to south, from Aomori to the Tokara islands. As can be inferred from the description of their linguistic systems, the Aomori and Shiiba varieties share certain typological characteristics, but are mutually unintelligible, which is unsurprising given the geographical distance separating them. The same can be stated about the Tokunoshima and Shiraho varieties, which belong to the Ryukyuan continuum. The book's structure, which presents concise yet detailed descriptions of the language systems of specific islands and villages, is extremely innovative and represents a step forward. This approach could help overcome generalisations based on segmentations into 'languages' that are rather subgroups of structurally similar language varieties.

As the editor himself states in the preface, the selection of language varieties to be presented in the book was probably determined by the research focus of the post-doc researchers and post-doc graduates who contributed to the project. Nevertheless, the book covers almost all the subgroups into which the Japonic varieties can be divided. The language varieties of mainland Japan are generally divided into eastern and western dialects, separated by a bundle of isoglosses that runs between Niigata and Toyama prefectures in the north and between Shizuoka and Aichi prefectures in the south. In Shimoji's book, the Nambu variety thus represents the eastern dialects, while the Izumo, Yanagawa and Shiiba varieties represent the western dialects - both those of western Honshū and those of Kyūshū Island. As for the Ryukyuan varieties, both the northern group (the subgroups of Amami and Okinawa) and the southern one (the subgroups of Miyako and Yaeyama) are covered. The reader will thus be able to gain a broad overview of the linguistic diversity that characterises the Japanese archipelago and discover the phonological and grammatical features of different linguistic subgroups.

Each chapter is organised in a similar fashion. For each language variety, a description of the phonological system and morphosyntax is provided, preceded by information on the places where that language variety is spoken, with detailed maps, and on its speakers. The section on phonology is extremely detailed: not only are the phone-

mic inventory and the phonotactics described, but data are provided on the phonetic realisations – which do not have any distinctive phonological features and are accurately described through the International Phonetic Alphabet – along with information on suprasegmental features, such as rhythm, accent, prosody and intonation. In the morphology section, each part of speech is treated in detail, also providing data on the inflection of verbs and adjectives. Syntactic aspects are presented in a concise yet accurate manner, beginning with the characteristics of simple sentences and ending with those of complex sentences. Because each chapter is structured in the same way, it is easy to compare different language varieties with respect to specific aspects, such as particles or numerals. At the end of each chapter there is an appendix with a sample text: all sentences are transcribed in the Latin alphabet and carefully labelled with grammatical tags. The volume is therefore suitable for use by scholars who have no knowledge of the Japanese writing system.

What emerges from reading Shimoji's book is that the level of linguistic analysis where there is the most conspicuous degree of variation is phonology, especially its segmental aspects. While we can identify many common features in the rhythmic system and accentual patterns, we find clear divergences in the vowel and consonantal segments, caused by linguistic changes that have led to innovations in each of the language varieties examined in this book. Although the morphosyntactic variations appear less pronounced, through the description of several varieties we can discover certain typological peculiarities that are absent in standard Japanese and its earliest attestations. This is the case, for example, with the grammatical category of number: in chapter 2 we discover that in the Tokunoshima variety personal pronouns are distinguished according to a trichotomous system that includes the dual, which is instead absent in standard Japanese. A closer look at Japonic varieties can therefore shed new light on various typological claims which have been made without taking these languages into account. As far as syntax is concerned, in local varieties of Japonic all alignment patterns are attested except the ergative-absolutive alignment. For example, the Nambu variety, described in chapter 7, has an object marker that only follows animate objects, while inanimate objects are typically zero-coded.

In short, Shimoji's book is an essential resource for anyone wishing to delve into the typological characteristics of the Japonic languages, which it describes in a thorough and reliable manner. The authors' linguistic documentation work allows us to take a closer look at the contemporary languages of small communities of speakers who are the custodians of a valuable linguistic tradition.