

**Historical ‘deconstruction’ and internal consistency
in the accentual paradigm of Proto-Mainland Japanese**

In the process of historical reconstruction, pitch accent languages present a set of unique problems. Whereas a stress language might have a predictable rhythm and a tone language might have a syllable-by-syllable lexical specification, pitch accent languages often consist of a balance of these two, with a mix of both redundant and unpredictable information making up the prosodic shape of a given word. Moreover, this information is at once paradigmatic (with a number of pitch accents and/or boundary tones possible at a given locus) and syntagmatic (since the distribution of these is important). At any given stage in the diachronic development of such a language, however, only a subset of the combinatoric possibilities for the combination of these elements is exhausted. As such, the full system of possible contrasts that exists at any given stage may vary in how balanced (or imbalanced) it is, with the historical pressure for paradigm uniformity leveling irregularities over time. In proposing a historical reconstruction for a pitch accent system, then, the internal symmetry of the system becomes an important factor.

This fact, however, has been largely unrecognized in the literature for the reconstruction of the historical ancestor of the modern dialects of Japanese, often held to be prototypical examples of a pitch-accent system. Of the numerous proposals made over the years for what the accentual paradigm of the ancestor language must have looked like, most early studies (Hayata 1973, Kobayashi 1974, McCawley 1978, Ramsey 1979) were limited to reconstructing the accentual system of the *Ruiju Myōgishō* (an early Japanese-Chinese character dictionary from ca. 1081) since this is the earliest surviving document containing markings for prosodic information. Recently, new descriptive data has become available from several dialects on various isolated islands in the south of Japan, allowing for the first time a historical reconstruction with the comparative method for Proto-Mainland Japanese, a stage of the language that predates the *Ruiju Myōgishō* (Shimabukuro 2002). In each these reconstructions, however, a different proto-paradigm is posited based on the available data, but little attention is devoted to the fact that the reconstructed proto-language must have existed as a ‘living’ phonological system at one point. As such, systematic gaps in the proposed paradigms, for example, have gone unnoticed.

The present study explores this issue in greater depth by assuming Shimabukuro’s (2002) proposed reconstruction of the accentual paradigm of one-, two-, and three-syllable nouns in Proto-Mainland Japanese and subjecting it to two tests for internal consistency, i.e. assessing the plausibility of the reconstruction as a linguistic system in its own right given what is known about the systems of the modern dialects. First, the system is reinterpreted in the modern Autosegmental-Metrical framework (Pierrehumbert & Beckman 1988) by converting Shimabukuro’s idiosyncratic transcriptions into two boundary tones (H% and L%) and two pitch accents (delayed-fall and delayed-rise, or H*+L and L*+H). In the process, several inconsistencies are uncovered (such as two superfluous pitch accent types) and alternative structures are proposed. Second, four ‘conditions’ are discussed for the proto-language (which could be formulated as high-ranked constraints in a framework like Optimality Theory) that ban certain forms in order to explain the systematic gaps in the paradigm. In the conclusion, this kind of historical ‘deconstruction’ is argued to be an important methodological tool in explaining the derivational relationship between a given proto-language and the various modern dialects it gave rise to.

References

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