Linguistically, What Is Ryukyuan? — Synchronic and Diachronic Perspectives

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Preamble

In this session we are, if I may say, de-constructing and then re-constructing the very definition of 'Ryukyu.' We are, in other words, examining assumptions of what this word means, from the point of view of geography, physical anthropology, linguistics, and music, as a representative of culture. I expect that the various definitions we offer will not be entirely congruent, and, in fact, that in certain instances our attempts to hold onto the label 'Ryukyu' or 'Ryukyuan' may fail utterly. Indeed, I propose to offer you two linguistic looks at 'Ryukyuan,' one that is a kind of snapshot and another that is a sort of videotape. The snapshot, or synchronic characterization, is in effect a definition of a Ryukyuan linguistic entity with fairly clear borders. The videotape, or diachronic characterization, turns out to be quite problematic, in that a mere description of the branching of dialects from what I call Late Proto-Japonic, the mother of all Ryukyuan and Japanese languages and dialects, leads us to see that Ryukyuan is nothing particularly different or special from other slightly differing varieties of non-Central-Japonic. The dialect that gave birth to Ryukyuan had much more in common with dialects in both Western and Eastern Japan than it did with Central Japonic, the speech of the founders of the Yamato polity. It was its speakers' early interaction with, and in some sense, repulsion from the Yamato polity that caused it to become what we now call 'Ryukyuan.' Thus social and political history is more important in defining Ryukyuan diachronically than mere dialect split is. Let me now turn to the 'snapshot.'

Synchronic definition

Ryukyuan languages are reasonably well-defined synchronically, in that all four Ryukyuan languages (i.e., Northern Ryukyuan, Miyako, Yaeyama, and Yonaguni) uniquely share certain phonological, morphological, syntactic, and lexical features.

First let me talk about phonology:

First of all, wholesale vowel raising (Thorpe 1983): Essentially this means that the proto-Ryukyuan vowels *e and *o became high vowels. In the north *e became *ï, and *o became *u. Frequently mergers between old *i and new *ï occurred giving new i, and only partial mergers of old and new *u occurred, for reasons that I need not go into here. In Sakishima the same raising occurred, but older *e became newer i, in turn forcing older *i to centralize, to the pronunciation ï. Some older *u also merged with the new ï, but any *u that remained in place merged with the newly risen *u from older *o.

This raising was a pattern that probably was not a part of proto-Ryukyuan, but rather spread throughout the Ryukyus after their isolation from the Yamato political zone. It may have accompanied the spread of the Ryukyu kingdom to the various islands.

Synchronically speaking, we should talk about these high vowels in comparison to, say, standard Japanese. I should also point out that the merging of vowel sequences in nearly all Ryukyuan dialects led to new long ē, sometimes shortened to e, and to new long ō, sometimes shortened to o. Thus the vowel systems of almost all Ryukyu dialects have five or more vowels, with the sole exception of Yonaguni, which is the only dialect to my knowledge that has only three. So, except for Yonaguni, it is a mistake to say that Ryukyuan dialects have fewer vowels than standard Japanese, which has five. The fact is that they normally have at least as many, frequently more. A typical pattern in Amami is seven, in southern Okinawa five, in Miyako six, in Yaeyama five or more, and only in Yonaguni, three.

Again synchronically we find the remains of large-scale progressive palatalizations (but significantly fewer in the outer islands, with largely lexical exceptions).

In the Northern Ryukyus the phenomenon is complex, but very widespread (Thorpe 1983). Individual words have undergone the phenomenon, as in Shuri tchu 'person' (< *pityo < *pito, cf. J. hito). It also appears in verb morphology, as in Shuri kacharu 'that wrote' (< *kakityaru < *kakitaru, cf. Class. J. kakitaru). In earlier times, it included palatalized : non-palatalized alternants for post-nominal particles in both Okinawa and Amami, but the central dialects of Okinawa have since lost the variation (perhaps under Japanese influence). For example, *-ga ~ *-gya *'(subject / genitive marker)' (e.g., Hokama & Saigō 1985[1972]:12.1), etc. In Amami many of these have also been reduced to one marker, but frequently with the palatalized alternant being chosen (cf. Serafim 1985). The palatalized variant of the topic marker has been chosen almost universally throughout the Ryukyus when fusion has not occurred. See below for fusion.

In the Southern Ryukyus, the phenomenon is largely lexical in nature (e.g., the adjectival stem *nigya- *'bitter'), suggesting that Progressive Palatalization may not ever have been a true phonetic process there, but rather borrowed piecemeal from Northern Ryukyuan dialects. (But cf., e.g., the object marker -yu in Miyako, compared to Old Japanese wo.)

Next I will take up morphology, or variations in the shape of words. My first example will be the secondary infinitive in quadrigrade verbs (Thorpe), a form not seen outside the Ryukyus, as in *yomi ~ *yome *'reading', etc., where Japanese has only yomi.

Next I will take up the development of a special form for habitual or other aspect, from the combination of infinitive plus a verb of existence, such as proto-Ryukyuan *kaki-wori 'is writing, writes' (Thorpe 1983). This form in western Japanese dialects has only progressive meaning, whereas the Ryukyuan form has extended the meaning also to habitual, and the progressive meaning has become secondary. (In this I disagree with Thorpe [1983], who takes this particular feature to be the proto-form of the conclusive (shūshikei) form of the verb. I believe that Hattori [1976] has convincingly argued against this.)

Next is a retention. By comparison with non-Ryukyuan dialects, Ryukyuan has retained a formerly widespread phenomenon, that is, a non-Central-Japanese-style merger of a subset of verbs that were upper bigrade (J. kami-nidan) in classical Japanese, but which are the equivalent of lower bigrade (J. shimo-nidan) throughout Ryukyuan (Serafim 1977, Thorpe 1983, Hattori 1976). (The examples below highlight the two fused categories of the proto-language in each daughter language.)

	Proto-Ryukyuan	Late P-Japonic	Old Japanese
LPJ Upper Bigr.	*sugi-	_*sugï- *'exceed'	sugi-
LPJ Middle Bigr.	*oke-	*okë- *'arise'	ökï-
LPJ Lower Bigr.	*uke-	*ukä- *'float it'	ukë-

(Note that we can classify certain phenomena as retentions of something that was once more widespread but lost elsewhere, and that these are a direct result of the Ryukyus having remained beyond the Yamato political sphere until very recently. Also note that such retentions are only sporadic in a few other dialects, due to large-scale replacement by forms favored in the central standard, which has spread to the outer borders of the Yamato political sphere as if in waves.)

Outside of verbs, we have widespread use of special nominal forms of adjective stems, retentions from Late Proto-Japonic. Examples are Proto-Ryukyuan *oQpe *'size' (cf. *oQpo *'big'), and *nage *'length' (cf. *naga- *'long') (Thorpe 1983, Serafim 1985). Retention of this in Japanese is much more sporadic, for example in take 'height', related to the stem taka- 'high'.

In addition Ryukyuan has developed true noun morphology, through fusion of earlier noun-plus-particle combinations. E.g., Shuri tsinu 'horn (OBJ)' (OGJ 157b, Ashworth 1971), but tsinō 'horn (TOP)' (Ashworth 1971); Shuri tchu 'person (OBJ)' (OGJ 444b) but tchō 'person (TOP)' (OGJ 444b); similarly, Miyako pstu 'person' but pstō 'person (TOP)' (Serafim 1976), none with clear break between stem and suffix.

As for syntactic differentiation, we have either retention or reinvention of the clefting-like construction known as **kakari-musubi.** In the north this is frequently marked both on verbs and nouns, as in the following example (OGJ 178a):

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Wâga-du wassaru.   (Regular conclusive form:  wassan.)
I SUB-! be.bad
It is I who am (the) bad (one).
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while in the south it is typically marked only on nouns (again, using -du), and sometimes the marking is so widespread (as in Miyako) that it has almost lost its force.

Further we may note the use of zero-marking on nouns in certain nominal oblique-case constructions where Japanese uses **ni,** as with *nar- *'become' (OGJ 406a):

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!Ufutchu-__ nayun.   (Cf. J. Otona ni naru.)
adult    -__ become.
They become adults.
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Lexically we will bring up just a few things: First, there is a uniquely Ryukyuan set of words marking politeness, e.g., the Shuri exalting verbal suffix -misēn (OGJ 381b) ~ -nsēn (OGJ 437b), and the Shuri polite verbal suffix -(y)abiyun ~ -(y)abīn ~ -ibīn ~ -bīn (OGJ 100b). While it is possible that both reflect borrowings from Central Japanese (mesu, ofasu

and faberi) in Japan's early medieval period, they have developed independently and spread throughout the Ryukyus, and thus represent an innovation that clearly distinguishes Ryukyuan from the rest of Japanese.

Second, we encounter many place names that defy etymology, and that appear to be different in shape from those of mainland Japan (to my knowledge). Some of these seem to come in pairs, e.g.:

> Kudaka (OGJ 830b) : Kudikin (OGJ 830a),
> China (OGJ 824a) : Chinin (OGJ 824b)

Third, we find words, sometimes very important ones, that are not shared by dialects outside of the Ryukyus:

> E.g., *weke *'male (person)', *peto 'dolphin' (Thorpe 1983)

Fourth, we see a widespread, though not universal, tendency to have voiced initial obstruents of plant or animal names where Japanese has voiceless ones (Thorpe 1983), e.g.:

> *guzira *'whale' (cf. J. kuzira); *dake ~ *take *'bamboo' (cf. J. take only); *gani *'crab' (cf. J. kani [but ganimata 'bandylegged']); *garasu *'crow' (cf. J. karasu)

I'm sure that others could easily add to this list of features of Ryukyuan that differentiate it as a whole from the rest of Japonic. It would also be easy to add features that distinguish the languages and dialects of Ryukyuan from each other, as well. However, insofar as the definition of Ryukyuan from a linguistic point of view is concerned, only those features that distinguish Ryukyuan varieties from each other but which are like other, non-Ryukyuan, Japonic dialects would be of interest in this particular discussion.

One feature, in any case, springs to mind. The Setouchi dialect group of southern Amami Ōshima and the small islands immediately to its south has a phonological phenomenon reminiscent of a slightly earlier time in Kagoshima City, namely the ending of words with a variety of consonants (Serafim 1985). These forms result from the loss of the vowels *i and *u, just as the forms in Kagoshima City did. It is plausible to regard these Setouchi forms as resulting from Kagoshima influence, since Kagoshima was the castle town of the former Satsuma domain, which conquered the Ryukyu kingdom and annexed the Amami region outright in 1609. Further, Setouchi was a waystation for trading and other voyages probably even from before the annexation, since it is protected from storms (Kerr 1958). Note, however, that this influence, if such it be, does not make the Setouchi dialects any less Ryukyuan, since they underwent such an effect only long after they had acquired more fundamental Ryukyuan characteristics, and were not under the influence of Satsuma long enough for those characteristics to be 'bleached,' so to speak.

Diachronic Definition

A clock-face metaphor: I imagine that southern Kyushu, the Ryukyus, and northeastern Taiwan are arrayed as if constituting the lower right quadrant of a clock-face. Southern

Kyushu is at three o'clock, the Ryukyus are arrayed between three-thirty and five-thirty, and northeastern Taiwan is at six o'clock. The large expanse of open sea separating the northern and southern Ryukyus is at 4:30. The metaphor serves two purposes: First, its shape schematizes the Ryukyus so that I can paint a verbal picture for you of the geography, and, second, the hands will sweep from three o'clock to six o'clock in the same time-space direction as the linguistic diffusion that I will discuss below.

Migration and diffusion: A language can spread to a new area through a large-scale movement of people, that is, a migration or invasion; or it can do so through diffusion, that is, with relatively little or even no movement of people. The latter option means that a people who do not speak that language adopt it. Relatively little migration and relatively large-scale diffusion (i.e., adoption) resulted in the spread of Slavic into Uralic-speaking areas of eastern Europe and the spread of Indo-Iranian into the northern part of the Indian peninsula, theretofore a Dravidian and perhaps Munda-speaking area. Traces of the original languages of the adopters remain in Eastern Slavic and in Indic (Thomason & Kaufman 1988).

Proto-Hayato and its arbitrary splitting: Any diachronic attempt to separate Ryukyuan cleanly from Japanese must fail, since Ryukyuan shares its historically deepest features with a subset of mainland dialects.

The political extension of the early Japanese state southward to at least as far as southern Kyushu probably cut apart arbitrarily a group of closely related dialects that extended from southwest Kyushu into the Ryukyus (Uemura 1977). Perhaps some of the Hayato group fled south, or perhaps some of them had already moved to islands past our imaginary three o'clock by the time of Yamato inclusion of those who were left behind. (Cf. also Taira 1994 for similar discussion.) Others were relocated to the Kinai area, and some served as bodyguards to the Yamato court (Uemura 1977).

Southern border of new '(Proto-)North-Hayato': Japanization: As suggested earlier, the former northern portion of this dialect area — that is, the part up to three o'clock — Japanized linguistically through early inclusion into the Yamato polity.

Northern Border of new '(Proto-)South-Hayato': Buildup of isoglosses: A series of unshared linguistic changes on either side of that new political border between three and three-thirty eventually deposited a thick bundle of what are in linguistics called isoglosses — linguistic borders, in effect — just north of Amami Ōshima, thus over a time defining the northern boundary of the linguistic area of Proto-South-Hayato [i.e., the nascent Ryukyuan].

Southern border of new 'Proto-South-Hayato': Spread to westernmost reach of island chain:

Events in the northern reaches of the area, of course, give no clue as to when the South-Hayato variety of Japonic reached the westernmost extreme of modern Ryukyu, that is, the area I metaphorically think of as five-thirty.

I should say that I have little idea what language was spoken in the northern Ryukyus before the coming of the South-Hayato language. It is possible that it was an earlier variety of Japonic (there are some strange tidbits in Ryukyuan that suggest such an older stratum). But even if there was such a language, what was there before that? The betting is in favor of either something related to Austronesian or something related to Ainu (cf. Hanihara 1994 and

Vovin 1993 and Vovin, personal communications, spring 1993). Pearson (1969:110) points out that a pottery type found in Yaeyama, where the culture is associated with one found in northern Taiwan, seems to have its northern reach in central Okinawa island, thus at least suggesting that Austronesian speakers may have populated, or at least communicated with, an area up to the relatively flat portions of southern Okinawa island. In the same passage he notes that sites in Amami and Okinawa show obvious cultural correlations to features in Kyushu, from mid- and late-Jomon all the way into about 1000 AD, though the latter correlating to Yayoi of the mainland, which ended in 300 or so AD.

Let me back up a bit at this juncture. I believe that Japonic entered Japan along with paddy rice agriculture from southern Korea, probably from the lower Naktong River basin, frequently called Kaya in Japanese, where Pusan is now (cf. Nelson 1993), approximately 2300 years ago. Hanihara's studies (1994 and elsewhere) suggest that the immigrants (now widely called **toraijin**) moved into the area between northern Kyushu and Kansai in large numbers, which was relatively empty of Jomonese inhabitants (Koyama 1990), but that the gradient of physical features associated with them drops gradually from northern Kyushu eastward and northward, and, importantly for the present discussion, from northern Kyushu southward.

Thus the passage of Yayoi culture and Japonic language into south Kyushu and thence into the Ryukyus occurred much more predominantly through diffusion than through migration. The Hayato probably were originally a non-Japonic-speaking group, but adopted superior Yayoi agriculture, and with it Japonic language (though Uemura [1977] thinks there was a time-lag between cultural and linguistic adoption, and Taira [1994] echoes this). The diffusion of Hayato speech beyond the pale of Yamato cannot have been later than the Nara period, though such a date seems far too late to me. Certainly, if they were fleeing, the dates would have been in the 600's or 700's, approximately 1000 years after Japonic had made landfall on northern Kyushu.

Pearson (1969:119) suggests that a northern Ryukyuan population shift of major proportions may have occurred sometime between 700 BC and 800 AD (because of other statements elsewhere, I take him to mean about 200 AD), and more specifically, that Japonic entered the Ryukyus about 200 AD, citing glottochronological studies, and noting the inception of a new culture type at that time. If this population shift correlates with people moving south, it may have been caused by pressure from **toraijin** occupying more central locations. Note that studies of Minatogawa humans (Hanihara 1990, 1994) indicate no great change in population morphology, though, suggesting that any such migration was of morphological Jomonese, even if they were linguistically Yayoi, i.e., Japonic.

But apparently no migrations occurred in Yaeyama, suggesting pure diffusion of language across our 4:30 gap. While Pearson (1969:119) does suggest introduction of 'a Japanese dialect' (meaning Ryukyuan) as late as the time that Sakishima came under the sway of the Shuri court, this seems to me to be too late to account for the immense linguistic diversity in Sakishima languages. Pearson also notes the inception of horticulture probably around 200 AD in the north. There is no good reason to believe that Japonic would have diffused south into non-agricultural areas, though its speakers may not have put to use most of the Yayoi cultural practices as an adaptation to Ryukyu, so we may guess that the earliest date for some form of Japonic was 200 AD at least on Okinawa. Pearson (1969:125) adds that the Ichiki culture (roughly 2600 BC to 1000 AD) of South Kyushu and the Satsunan islands

immediately north of Ryukyu is probably the source for the population of the northern Ryukyus, and that the Taiyuan culture of eastern Taiwan (roughly 0-1250 AD, possibly earlier [Pearson 1969:128]) is probably the source of migration into Sakishima, though he notes influences from further south as well (1969:130). Since the Ryukyus were actually populated much earlier than these dates, I assume that this should be taken to mean that migrations occurred during these times, though I am not aware of reasons for excluding a diffusion hypothesis (cf. Pearson 1969:130).

The spread into Sakishima: The inhabitants of Sakishima before the diffusion of some variety of South Hayato language and culture may be assumed to have been Austronesian-speaking, probably of something closely related to a language or languages in eastern Taiwan, judging from the archaeological findings of Pearson (1969:118-138).

Probably, the nascent Ryukyuans were more advanced technologically than the original Austronesian Sakishima inhabitants, and the Sakishima Austronesians would thus have been under some pressure to adopt the new toolkit, culture (insofar as practicable), and language (again, insofar as practicable). Pearson points out that movement of small populations to isolated locations should result in loss of many of the cultural features, followed by intensive adaptation to the new environment (1969:132f).

The collision with Taiwan Austronesian: Here population dynamics come into play, as well as political and cultural dynamics. Taiwan, a large landmass, was, I assume, relatively densely populated with people who were no doubt at least as successful in survival, and perhaps at war, as the newly forged Ryukyuans. Thus the diffusion down the Ryukyuan chain met its natural end at Yonaguni, despite no-doubt frequent contacts between the inhabitants of eastern Taiwan and Yonaguni. Pearson (1969) points out that the Taiyuan culture of eastern Taiwan was highly developed in wood- and stone-working, and in textile manufacture.

Dating the spread westward: Some variety of South Hayato reached Yonaguni possibly as late as within the last millennium, even the last 500 years. I base this possibility not on linguistic inferences but on a suggestion made by Pearson (1969:119), that Ryukyu Kingdom officials may have brought the language to Sakishima. At first blush such a claim seems ridiculous, since Yonaguni has a very thick layer of sound changes. However, for reasons why this is not necessarily a hindering factor, see immediately below, though I doubt that adoption of a variety of South Hayato could have been that late.

Likely reasons for the extreme variation of language in Sakishima: Each westward diffusion of a variety of South Hayato necessitated a new non-Japonic-speaking group's adoption of a variety of South Hayato that had already been adopted perhaps a number of times by non-Japonic-speaking peoples to the (north-)east. Each adoption necessarily added a new layer of linguistic difference resulting from interference from the original language of the adopters, the Sakishima group of whom at least I assume not to be Japonic speakers, especially if the adoption was relatively sudden (Thomason & Kaufman 1988). It should therefore come as no surprise that the farther to the south or west you go in the Ryukyus, the more 'non-Japonic' the languages seem.

And keep in mind that the adoptions of Japonic started well within Kyushu itself, judging from the physical-anthropological evidence (Hanihara 1990, 1994). Thus the thick layers of

sound change (to cite one kind of language change) that one encounters in Ryukyuan are a complex of natural sound change and of sound change that occurs as a result of adoption. We can then add other sorts of changes, for example in the adoption in the Outer Islands of a new gerund based on a combination of one of the two Ryukyuan infinitives and the gerund of the verb meaning 'do' (e.g., Miyako yumi-tti < *yome-site [Serafim 1976, Thorpe 1983], which is essentially a simplification, since it obviates having to learn a number of varied forms, and thus akin to phenomena in pidginization and creolization [Thomason & Kaufman 1988]), or in the retention of vocabulary items from the pre-Japonic language or languages, as exemplified earlier.

A prediction suggests itself: The farther southwest the dialect of Ryukyuan is, the thicker an accretion of sound changes it will have. I don't know that anyone has stated this hypothesis or tried to prove it, but it might be worthwhile attempting to prove or disprove it, since the result will be a far better understanding of the relation of Japonic language varieties to the cultures in which they are embedded.

If the above prediction is borne out, then we will have three pieces of evidence for southwestward diffusion: The more southwestern the dialect, (1) the less 'Japonic' it looks, and (2) the larger the number of sound changes from proto-Japonic it has; in addition, (3) it should turn out that there is an ever leftward branching in terms of subgrouping within Ryukyuan, since such branching is necessarily the result of the diffusion that is hypothesized here.

Linguistic subgrouping vs. Ryukyu-internal culture areas: It should be no surprise that Ryukyu separates essentially into two groups according to general culture type, that is, Sakishima, and then all the rest (Pearson 1969). After all, Sakishima constituted a separate culture area until relatively recently in archaeological time. But what we should find upon fine-grained subgrouping is a general trend of leftward branching reflecting the diffusion of Japonic southwestward. Thus there should be at least some discontinuity between culture areas and the diachronic branches of the genetic tree. Since we might state that, all else being equal, new language moves in with new culture, it must be the case either (1) that the old and new culture mixed, or (2) that ecological factors were so overwhelming that the new culture had to change to fit the environment. Note also, importantly, that we are likely to discover the spread of the culture if we successfully perform linguistic subgrouping, since the culture and language are likely to spread as one, regardless of whether by diffusion or migration, though always with some effect by a pre-existing group. (Any cultural discontinuities will more readily show up than linguistic ones, since any language can be adapted to fit any new place or group, whereas culture has both ecologically and arbitrarily determined elements.)

Other factors leading to difficulty in diachronically characterizing Ryukyuan as a separate entity: The diachronic difficulty in separately characterizing Ryukyuan or its Ryukyu-like progenitor also stems from the fact that it was *Central Japanese* that first split from the rest of Proto-Japanese (Thorpe 1983, Uemura 1977). Thus the Ryukyu-like progenitor shared more features with its sister dialects than with its cousin, Central Japanese, the features of which however eventually swamped most other dialects with the spread of the Japanese state.

Conclusion

To review, then, we find no great difficulty in characterizing Ryukyuan as a linguistic entity as long as we don't leave the realm of synchrony. This is true despite the fact that four of the five languages of Japonic are Ryukyuan. On the other hand we discover that the genetic development of Japonic subvarieties does not respect the label 'Ryukyuan' at all. We realize, then, that the ability to characterize the Japonic varieties called Ryukyuan is the historical result of the interaction of linguistic change with the lives of people in a fairly well defined geographic area that was beyond the pale of direct Yamato control. Any number of other peoples were Japanized early on, losing their separate ethnic and linguistic identity and adopting that of Yamato. The Ryukyuans in turn were forged at least in part through the consolidation of the Ryukyuan state. But long before that, peoples who lived in small numbers in the Ryukyu islands also abandoned their own language or languages, and adopted the newly forming and steadily changing Ryukyuan. In an ironic twist of fate, the South Hayato, now merged with the gene pool of the former inhabitants of Ryukyu, would in 1609 be conquered by the former North Hayato, as surrogates for the newly emerging centralized feudal government of Japan. But it has only been in this century that the Ryukyuans have started their own very late Yamato-ization, standing just on the other side of the border, in their fate, from the Taiwanese and the Koreans.

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