

Towards a Stronger Theory of Proto-Korean-Japanese: New Comparisons and Reconstructions

ABSTRACT: The theory that Japanese and Korean share a common linguistic origin remains highly controversial. This theory has its supporters (Martin, 1966; Whitman, 1985; Frellesvig, 2001; Unger, 2009), its detractors (Vovin, 2010), as well as its skeptics (such as Lee and Ramsey, 2011). In particular, three main obstacles stand in the way of establishing a common origin:

1. a lack of a “critical mass” of cognates that could validate proposed sound correspondences,
2. the existence of apparent exceptions to those proposed sound correspondences,
3. problems in relating important grammatical morphemes, such as genitive particles.

This paper seeks to address each of these deficiencies by proposing new cognates and correspondences and by scrutinizing previous assumptions to build a more viable and robust theory of proto-Korean-Japanese.

1. Against the perennial critique that the Japanese-Korean hypothesis lacks sufficient evidence, I offer new J-K matches, building on the framework established in Martin (1966) and Whitman (1985) with subsequent improvements. Proposed cognates include core vocabulary unlikely to have been borrowed:

OJ <i>wor-</i> , <i>wi-</i> ‘is seated, is present’ < pJ *wo- ~ MK <i>wo-</i> ‘comes’	pKJ * wo- ‘comes’
OJ <i>ku-</i> ‘comes’ < pJ *ko- ~ MK <i>ka-</i> ‘goes’ < pK *ko-	pKJ * ko- ‘goes’
OJ <i>pe-</i> ‘experiences it’ < pJ *pə- ~ MK <i>pwo-</i> ‘sees it’ < pK *pwə-	pKJ * pwə- ‘sees it’
OJ <i>yoro-si</i> ‘good’, <i>yo-si</i> ‘good’, <i>ye-si</i> ‘good’ < pJ *yər- ~	pKJ * dzəl ‘good’
MK <i>cal</i> ‘well’ < pK *cəl, <i>cul-keW-</i> ‘joyous’	

I also provide internal and comparative evidence for a correspondence of OJ *a* ~ MK *uy*, pKJ ***aj**:

OJ <i>ma</i> ‘interval’ ~ MK <i>muy</i> ‘time interval’	pKJ * maj
OJ <i>ka</i> ‘mosquito’ ~ MK <i>mwo-kuy</i> ‘id.’	pKJ * kaj
OJ <i>-nap-</i> ‘be afflicted with’ ~ MK <i>nip-</i> ‘id.; wears’ < pK *nuyp-	pKJ * najp-
OJ <i>pasu</i> ‘aslant’ ~ MK <i>pisu-tum</i> ‘id.’ < pK *puysu-	pKJ * pajsu

2. While groundbreaking, a notable weakness of Martin’s (1966) early reconstructions was the difficulty in formulating regular, *exceptionless* sound correspondences relating Japanese to Korean. To resolve this problem, I propose abandoning problematic “look-alike” cognates for formally stronger matches that allow us to focus on known, regular correspondences:

MK <i>tul-</i> ‘enters’ ≠ OJ <i>ir-</i> ‘id.’ (Martin, 1966); instead, ~ OJ <i>yor-</i> ‘approaches it,’ pKJ * dil-
OJ <i>swora</i> ‘sky’ ≠ MK <i>hanolh</i> ‘id.’ (Whitman, 1985); instead, ~ MK <i>soy</i> ‘dawn’, pKJ * sora
MK <i>hanolh</i> < *ha-nə ‘great-ADNOM’ + <i>lh</i> ‘LOC’ ~ OJ <i>kamwi</i> ‘god’ < *ka- ‘great,’ pKJ * xa-
OJ <i>sirola</i> ‘white’ ≠ MK <i>huy-</i> , <i>haya-</i> ‘id.’; instead, ~ MK <i>syey-</i> ‘turns grey’, pKJ * sjerə

3. Although Japanese and Korean show paradigmatic similarities in their morphosyntax, the actual morphemes themselves often do not straightforwardly correspond (Martin, 1991; Unger, 2009). As correspondences in morphology have special significance in establishing genetic relationships, I present a diachronic account of genitives in both Japanese and Korean, providing reflexes for every particle and showing how morphological reanalysis can account for diachronic shifts:

OJ *-si* ‘adj. attributive/conclusive’; *-sa* ‘adj. nom.’ ~ MK *-s* ‘inanimate gen.; substantivizer’
pKJ **-s-* ‘root attributivizer’ + **-i* ‘copula; nominalizer’ / **-a* ‘gerund’

OJ *-tu* ‘locative genitive; counter’ ~ MK *-lwo* ‘allative; instrumental’
pKJ **two/dwo* ‘allative / instrumental’ (Ratte, 2013)

OJ *-no* ‘genitive’ ~ MK *-(n)u/on* ‘topic particle’
pKJ **-ni* ‘genitive’

OJ *-ga* ‘genitive’ ~ MK *-uy* ‘animate genitive’ < pK **-aj*
pKJ **ŋaj*

In amassing formally strong cognates and jettisoning problematic matches, this research brings us closer to a Neogrammarian approach, one that should lead to the elusive “critical mass” of cognates necessary to end the debate. New applications of the comparative method reveal previously unconsidered correspondences, some of which hold the key to understanding otherwise mysterious correspondences in morphology. This paper thus shows that there may be more morphological innovation and phonological shift in the history of Korean and Japanese than we have previously surmised.

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