

Symmetrical reflexes of Proto-Ryukyuan *i and *u in North and South Ryukyuan

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In this presentation, traces of Proto-Ryukyuan (PR) close vowels *i and *u in daughter languages will be explored. Ryukyuan is regarded here as a sister language group of Mainland Japanese and Eastern Japanese within the Japonic family (Pellard 2015:15).

PR had a five-vowel system: *a, *i, *u, *e, *o (Thorpe 1983). Subsequently, most Ryukyuan regiolects underwent unconditioned mid-vowel raising: *e > i (or, conditionally, > i in Amami, which partially blocked the *e/*i merger in this area) and *o > u. This resulted in the loss of a heavily loaded functional distinction between mid and close vowels (cf. potential homophone pairs such as *pune ‘boat’ and *pone ‘bone’, or *ki ‘fog’ and *ke ‘tree’), propelling the daughter regiolects to undergo changes of *i and *u in order to avoid or resolve the homophony caused by the vocalic merger.

This paper will offer a systemic look at these homophony-blocking mechanisms in different Ryukyuan regiolects, emphasizing the symmetry in the distinct strategies applied in North and South Ryukyuan (Sakishima) subgroups.

PR reconstructions mostly come from Thorpe 1983. Modern Ryukyuan vocabulary has been cited from a range of sources listed in References.

In North Ryukyuan (regiolects of Amami and Okinawa), two general strategies concerning the differentiation of PR mid- and close vowels can be identified: palatalization and glottalization. Both involve a phonological change of the consonant preceded by PR *i or *u, thus ensuring a phonemic-level differentiation without changing the original close vowel *per se*:

- palatalization of PR *ki, *gi: *kimu > *teimu* ‘liver’, *kugi > *kudzi* ‘nail’, as well as *tu, *su, *zu: *tuki > *teitei* ‘moon’, *suba > *eiba* ‘lips’ (Shuri-Okinawan);
- glottalization of PR obstruent plus close vowel sequences: *pune > *p’uni* ‘boat’ (Kuji/Haneji-Kunigamian), *pi > *p’i*: ‘fire’ (Nakijin-Kunigamian), *kinu > *k’in* ‘clothing’ (Nase-Amamian);
- initial vowel glottalization: *i, *u > *ʔ/#_*, in particular when followed by a nasal or a glide, and often accompanied by geminate epenthesis: *ine > *ʔni* ‘rice’ (Shuri-Okinawan), *iju > *ʔju* ‘fish’, *uma > *ʔmma* ‘horse’ (Nakijin-Kunigamian).

Differentiation strategies most typical of South Ryukyuan (regiolects of Miyako and Yaeyama) are vowel shifts, fricativization and assimilation/deletion:

- the main vowel shifts are PR *i > i (or its region-specific variants) and *u > u (likewise); *i > i was usually unconditioned, while *u > u pertains to environments where *u followed an alveolar consonant (*t, *s, *z, and possibly also *r);
- in Miyakoan, *i after stops and in onsetless positions underwent fricativization: *kimu > *ksmu* ‘liver’, *kugi > *fugz* ‘nail’ (Hirara-Miyakoan). Fricativization also applies to PR *pu and *ku: *pune > *funi/huni* ‘boat’, *kuro > *ffu* (Miyakoan, Ishigaki-Yaeyaman), *vo*: (Kuro-Yaeyaman) ‘black’;
- assimilation in Miyakoan involves word-initial *i and *u: *ijako > *zzaku* ‘oar’, *uma-ga > *mmaga* ‘grandchild’ (Hirara-Miyakoan); parallel instances in Yaeyaman involve deletion of the PR vowel: *ijako > *jaku*, *uma-ga > *ma*: (Ishigaki-Yaeyaman). In both Miyakoan and Yaeyaman, *i and *u are deleted in interconsonantal settings with a rightward *r: *ciro > *ssu* (Miyakoan), *εeu* (Taketomi-Yaeyaman) ‘white’, *abura > *avva* (Miyakoan), *ava* (Iriomote-Yaeyaman) ‘oil’.

Thus, the major changes of PR *i and *u observed in both North and Sakishima Ryukyuan pertain to the following PR environments:

- post-stop;
- post-sibilant;
- word-initial.

While most of these changes are hypothesized to have occurred independently in specific daughter languages rather than inherited from Proto-Northern Ryukyuan or Proto-Sakishima respectively, they are all assumed to have been triggered by the mid-vowel merger.

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