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Vovin, Alexander 2020. *Descriptive and comparative grammar of Western Old Japanese*. Handbook of Oriental Studies | Handbuch Der Orientalistik, section five: Japan, vols 16/1 and 16/2, edited by R. Kersten. Leiden/Boston: Brill.

Alexander Vovin's two-part *Descriptive and Comparative Grammar of Western Old Japanese* (henceforth GWOJ), first released respectively in 2005 (Vovin 2005a) and 2009 (Vovin 2009) under the auspices of Global Oriental, for well over a decade now, has been the primary reference source for the study of Old Japanese in Western linguistics. Not only is it the only monograph in English devoted in its entirety to the subject of pre-Heian period Japanese, but it is also one of the very few English-language reference materials dedicated to *any* historical variety of Japanese, among which one can count Martin 1987, Bentley 2001, Frellesvig 2010, and individual chapters in Tranter 2012.

The first edition of GWOJ was impressive in volume – close to 1,400 pages – and scope, covering data from all available phonographic Old Japanese corpora, while also, suitably to its title, conducting systematic comparisons of specific Western Old Japanese morphemes and structures with their counterparts in other Japonic languages: Eastern Old Japanese, Old/Classical Ryukyuan, and modern Ryukyuan. In so doing, GWOJ became a pioneering publication in comparative Japonic linguistics, placing the linguistic data offered by the non-Central Mainland Japonic varieties in a welcome and overdue spotlight.

At the same time, as expected from a work of this size and scale, the initial publication left some room for improvement. This led to last year's release of the second edition – *Revised, Updated and Enlarged*, as announced by the subtitle of the said edition – this time as volume 16 of the *Handbook of Oriental Studies* series by Brill.

Content-wise, the most meaningful updates, as pointed out by Vovin himself in the *Preface to the Second Edition* (Vovin 2020: XXI–XXII), concern the parts devoted to comparisons of Western Old Japanese with Eastern Old Japanese, a welcome result of Vovin's recent extensive studies on Eastern Old Japanese in preparation of the upcoming *Corpus and Dictionary of Eastern Old Japanese* (Vovin and Ishisaki-Vovin 2021). The

second edition also has a brand new chapter on interjections (Chapter 11) and extensions to chapters on adverbs (Chapter 7, added sections 17 on *sika* and 18 on *keⁿdasi ~ keⁿdasiku*), conjunctions (Chapter 8, added section 4 on *mənəyuwe*), particles (Chapter 9) and postpositions (Chapter 10).

By contrast, the voluminous parts of the first edition devoted to “external comparisons”, i.e. parallels between morphemes and structures of Western Old Japanese and the languages of East and Northeast Asia, have been visibly trimmed. This decision was motivated by the shift in the focus of the second edition, which reflects the almost twenty-year gap between the two releases. The non-Japonic comparative content of the first edition was motivated by the necessity observed by Vovin to use the platform of an Old Japanese grammar to argue against the longstanding theories of a genetic relationship between Japonic and the so-called Altaic (currently more often referred to as Transeurasian, cf. Robbeets and Savelyev 2020) languages (Vovin 2020: XXI), of which Vovin himself had been a proponent until early 2000s. Since then, says Vovin, ample evidence has been provided against the Altaic theory and its alleged relationship with Japonic languages¹, which means there is little reason to devote extra space to the debate in a monograph dedicated to Old Japanese. This is a commendable decision regardless of the reader’s personal view on the Altaic/Transeurasian matter. It allows the content of GWOJ to stay focused and concise without diverging to speculations on topics only loosely related to the questions at hand. The result is a coherent description of Western Old Japanese within a broader Japonic context, with occasional comparisons with Korean, Chinese and Ainu from the perspective of language contact.

Another important update concerns romanization. Other than unifying the occasional inconsistencies in conventions observed between Vovin 2005-a and 2009, the second edition sees the change from a variant of the Yale transcription of Old Japanese (Frellesvig and Whitman 2008: 4) to a predominantly phonetic system. Vocalic distinctions are now shown using an approximation of their putative sound values, and digraphs such as <yi>, <iy>, <ye>, <ey> and <wo> have been eliminated altogether. The so-called *kō-rui* series of vowels <i> or i1, <e> or e1 and <o> or o1 are now written respectively as plain monograph <i>, <e> and <o>, while the contrasting *otsu-rui* series of i2, e2 and o2 have also become monograph <î>, <ê> and <ə>. By the same token, voiced obstruent phonemes are now

¹ Indeed, Vovin himself has presented his refutation of “Altaicism” in numerous papers, most famously perhaps in Vovin 2005b, as well as in a contra-Japonic-Korean monograph, Vovin 2010.

written as prenasalized and voiced with a superscript indication of prenasalization (cf. the notation of the conditional converb *-a^mba*, Vovin 2020: 655), compared to the earlier configuration of a nasal segment and a voiced obstruent (*-aNpa*, Vovin 2009: 726). The author mentions (Vovin 2020: XXII) that his concern about the accessibility of GWOJ to the readers outside the field of historical Japonic linguistics was the factor behind this change of romanization; and the indirect point that he makes about the obscurity of Yale and other Old Japanese romanization conventions is difficult to contest. Nevertheless, even though adjusting to these phonetic conventions may initially take time, it is not only readers from a non-Japonic background, but also specialists in the subject matter that should be able to appreciate the refreshing unambiguity of the transcript conventions employed in GWOJ's second edition. These conventions leave no room for obscurity, neither in terms of the interpretation of the applied symbols nor the author's descriptive stance on the phonological inventory of Western Old Japanese.

The structure of GWOJ follows the first edition's division into two composites, although this time, the labels are simply "Volume I" (chapters 1–5) and "Volume II" (chapters 6–11). By contrast, the composites of the first edition were titled "parts" rather than "volumes", and each had an elaborate subtitle summarizing their content. In spite of these superficial alternations, the second edition volumes are an essentially faithful reflection of their predecessors both in terms of structure and content. The major exception is the first edition's "Additions to Part One" chapter, which, unsurprisingly, has been moved from the beginning of Part Two to the appropriate sections of the second edition's Volume I.

One of the retained editorial characteristics is the consecutive numeration of pages in both volumes. Ultimately, this decision is quite user-friendly since it facilitates citation and referencing of the source and allows for utilizing it as a complete, whole monograph while keeping both books at a reasonable physical volume that still allows for a comfortable read.

The navigation between volumes is aided by a functional table of contents, which displays additional improvements over the first edition. The table of contents comprising the entire eleven chapters is repeated at the beginning of each volume, which allows the reader a quick first-glance synthesis of the content and contributes to the impression of the two books constituting a coherent two-part whole. At the same time, these volume-initial tables of contents only reveal the most general structure of the monograph, listing no further than the second-order division of chapters. The more detailed lists of contents are reserved for the pages directly preceding specific

chapters. Far from redundant, such an introduction of two kinds of content lists can be evaluated as significantly increasing the searchability of both, as well as the legibility of the main table of contents – especially considering that most chapters contain numerous subchapters divided into multiple subunits, with the record-holders having up to seven units of division.

Also worth mentioning are GWOJ's comprehensive indexes, even though their number and categories have not changed, remaining at the following four: personal names, terms, forms and constructions, and examples from the texts. All indexes have been adequately updated and reorganized, and they are an essential aid to anyone interested in using GWOJ as a reference source. The four index types seem to cover all of the essential query areas. From my personal experience with the new GWOJ over the past few months – and it needs to be emphasized that in my area of expertise GWOJ is, indeed, a primary source – I can testify that a successful search for any kind of information usually does not take longer than around ten seconds, a feat which cannot be overestimated in a publication of roughly 1,300-page range size. If there is anything left to ask for in the index department, it would be a separate index devoted to forms and constructions in languages other than Western Old Japanese.

Concerning more significant downsides of GWOJ's second edition, a particularly evident one is the lack of bibliographic updates concerning Ryukyuan linguistics. Since the first edition of GWOJ, the Ryukyuan branch of Japonic linguistics has seen a surge of published research results, including dictionaries (Kiku and Takahashi 2005, Maeara et al. 2011, Tomihama 2013, Shimoji 2017), synchronic monographs (Heinrich et al. 2015, Shimoji 2018), diachronic/comparative monographs (Bentley 2008, Tawata 2010), open-access research reports by the National Institute of Japanese Language and Linguistics (NINJAL), numerous M.A. and Ph. D. dissertations, and countless academic papers. Regrettably, the second edition of GWOJ reflects none of this. The consequences are not limited to an outdated reference list only, but also to content errors in comparisons, such as incorrect claims that Ryukyuan has no cognates of the passive-potential suffix *-(a)ye* (Vovin 2020: 755; cf. Jarosz 2019, and the elaboration on the topic in Jarosz 2022) or causative *-(a)sime* (Vovin 2020: 755; cf. Jarosz 2015: 276, Shimoji 2018: 194).

Considering that GWOJ is first and foremost a monograph on Western Old Japanese, these Ryukyuan imperfections are arguably a minor flaw. Nevertheless, for a source that has the “comparative” component in its title,

a more accurate picture of the Ryukyuan side of Japonic would have been expected – and more than welcome.

These bibliographic and content imperfections notwithstanding, the second edition of GWOJ is a useful tool of primary importance to anyone interested in the study of pre-Heian period Japanese language and literature, not to mention specialists in diachronic or comparative Japonic and/or East Asian linguistics. It retains all of its predecessor's valuable characteristics while throwing in several worthwhile additions and updates. It will be indispensable in the library of any Japanologist working on pre-modern Japanese philology and a welcome addition to the booklists of otherwise oriented Japanologists and linguists.

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