

Towards an adequate description of the tonal systems of Southern Ryukyuan

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This talk is aimed at discussing methods that facilitate an adequate description of the tonal systems of dialects of the Southern Ryukyuan languages (Miyako, Yaeyama, and Yonaguni). In order to achieve reliable reconstruction of the tonal system of Proto-Ryukyuan, it is necessary to use reliable data from modern dialects of Northern and Southern Ryukyuan. The currently available data from dialects of Southern Ryukyuan, however, are insufficient both in quality and quantity to reconstruct the Proto-Ryukyuan tonal system.

In the past decade, dialects of Southern Ryukyuan such as Ikema, Tarama, and Kuroshima have been revealed to have complex tonal systems, where tonal contrasts are neutralized in a wide range of prosodic contexts, and a single tonal class can exhibit several allophonic variations. Traditional studies devoted to reconstruct the tonal system of Proto-Ryukyuan have unfortunately been based on twentieth-century descriptions of dialects of Southern Ryukyuan, which frequently underestimate the number of tonal contrasts due largely to their overlooking of wide-spread tonal neutralization occurring in these dialects. For example, the number of contrastive tones in the Ikema, Tarama, and Kuroshima dialects has mistakenly been considered to be two, but they were recently revealed to be three.

This talk will demonstrate that, in order to describe the tonal systems of Southern Ryukyuan correctly, it is necessary to analyze allophonic variations of tonal classes in a variety of prosodic contexts, taking into account such factors as the position of the word in the utterance (utterance-final vs. non-final), and the number and length of postpositional particles. It will also propose a new word list consisting of 160 cognates that will facilitate an adequate description of the tonal systems of dialects of the Ryukyuan languages.