

Was Old Japanese a Polysynthetic Language?

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Polysynthesis is sometimes regarded as a matter of degree, determined by the number of traits satisfied by a language on a typological checklist including items such as noun incorporation, verbal crossreferencing of arguments, and valency changing morphology such as applicatives and causatives, and a high index of agglutination. This paper examines the following five arguably “polysynthetic” traits of OJ, using data from the Oxford Corpus of Old Japanese (OCOJ)

1. Apophonic/non-apophonic NI) in finite verbs with *rendaku* (voicing assimilation) (Russell 2012)
2. Apohonic NI without *rendaku*
3. Pseudo noun incorporation (Yanagida 2007a, b)
4. The “prefixes” *i-* (active/ergative?) and *sa(N)-* (absolutive?) (Yanagida 2007b)
5. Preverbal reciprocal *api*

All of these traits are lost in subsequent varieties of Japanese. (1) survives in lexicalized form and (5) has been replaced by the suffixal reciprocal *-aw-*. (4) is already fossilized at the OJ stage, but the surviving evidence suggests that the “prefixes” *i-* and *sa(N)-* were pronominal clitics.

The OJ trait most distinct from modern Japanese is the existence of pseudo-NI (Yanagida 2007a, b). We compare the OJ pseudo-NI pattern to the well-studied cases of Niuean (Massam 2001) and Hindi (Dayal 2011), and address the issue of how pseudo-NI relates to a structural account of polysynthesis.

References

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