The classification of Ryūkyūan dialects

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There have been numerous attempts to classify the dialects of Ryūkyūan by different linguists. One of the much-quoted first 'modern' classification schemes is the one by 仲宗根政善 Nakasone Seizen (「琉球方言概説」 'Ryūkyū-hōgen Gaisetsu', in 『方言学講座』 *Hōgengaku Kōza*, volume 4, 1961). Nakasone's classification divides the Ryūkyūan dialects into four branches, matching the four island groups of Amami, Okinawa, Miyako and Yaeyama. What criteria did he based the classification on is unknown:

奄美大島方言 :	Amami Ōshima dialects:
大島本島方言	Ōshima Main-island dialects
喜界島方言	Kikai dialects
徳之島方言	Tokunoshima dialects
沖永良部方言	Okinoerabu dialects
与論方言	Yoron dialect
沖縄方言 :	Okinawa dialects:
沖縄北部方言	Northern Okinawa dialects
沖縄南部方言	Southern Okinawa dialects
宮古方言 :	Miyako dialects:
宮古本島方言	Miyako Main-island dialects
伊良部方言	Irabu dialects
多良間方言	Tarama dialect
八重山方言	Yaeyama dialects

Nakasone has also commented on these three points:

- There is a big difference between the dialects of the Amami-Okinawa Islands in the north and the Miyako-Yaeyama Islands in the south. The Ryūkyūan dialects can thus be classified broadly as Northern Ryūkyūan and Southern Ryūkyūan.

- Within the Yaeyama group, the dialects of Yonaguni Island and Hateruma Island should have separate branch of their own.

- The boundary between Northern Okinawa dialect and Southern Okinawa dialect is between 金武村・旧恩納村 Kin-son/ the former Onna-son to the north and 読谷村・旧美里村 Yomitan-son/ the former Misato-son to the south. In other words the old 国頭郡 Kunigami-gun to the north and the old 中頭郡 Nakagami-gun to the south.

It is widely recognised the Ryūkyūan dialects can be divided into Northern and Southern Ryūkyūan dialects. The distance amongst the Amami-Okinawa Islands in the north and the Miyako-Yaeyama Islands in the south are at most 80km, but the distance between Okinawa Island and Miyako Island is approximately 300km. Interactions between the northern and the southern Islands were infrequent, which caused the huge linguistic differences. Nakasone has also recognised this point, but he did not expressed this fact in his classification diagram, with each group of Amami, Okinawa, Miyako and Yaeyama dialects on the same level.

In 1963, the 『沖縄語辞典』 *Okinawa-go Jiten* was published. Based on 首里 Shuri dialect, which is widely perceived as Standard Ryūkyūan, this is the first major modern dictionary of Ryūkyūan. The article 「琉球方言概説」 'Ryūkyū-hōgen Gaisetsu' by 上村幸男 Uemura Yukio in the dictionary includes a classification of the Ryūkyūan dialects. The Uemura classification is based mainly on phonological criteria (Uemura, 1963):

奄美・沖縄方言群：	Amami-Okinawa dialect group:
喜界島方言	Kikai dialect
奄美大島本島方言	Amami Ōshima dialects
北部方言（上方方言）	Northern dialect
南部方言（下方方言）	Southern dialect
徳之島方言	Tokunoshima dialect
沖永良部島方言	Okinoerabu dialects
東部方言	Eastern dialect
西部方言	Western dialect
与論島方言	Yoron dialect
沖縄北部方言（国頭方言）	N. Okinawa dialect (Kunigami)
沖縄南部方言	S. Okinawa dialect
先島方言群：	Sakishima dialect group:
宮古群島方言	Miyako Islands dialects
宮古本島方言	Miyako dialect
伊良部島方言	Irabu dialect
多良間島方言	Tarama dialect
八重山群島方言	Yaeyama dialects
与那国島方言	Yonaguni dialect

The Uemura classifications make three divisions: Amami-Okinawa dialects, Miyako-Yaeyama dialects, and Yonaguni dialect. Yonaguni Island is the western-most island of the Ryūkyū Islands, and is considerably separated from the rest of the Yaeyama Islands which cluster around the 'big' islands of Ishigaki and Iriomote. Nakamoto (1981) commends that Yonaguni dialect is basically a kind of Yaeyama dialect, but it has diverged from the rest of the Yaeyama dialects through complicated linguistic changes. The affiliation of the Yonaguni dialect within the system of Ryūkyūan dialects varies with different classifications.

平山輝男 Hirayama Teruo and 中本正智 Nakamoto Masachie (『琉球与那国方言の研究』 *Ryūkyū Yonaguni-hōgen no Kenkyū* 1964) proposed a five way distinction: Amami, Okinawa, Miyako, Yaeyama and Yonaguni. Two years later, Hirayama proposed another classification (「琉球方言区画」 'Ryūkyū-hōgen

Kukaku' in 『琉球方言の総合的研究』 *Ryūkyū-hōgen no Sōgōteki Kenkyū*, 1966).

The Northern Ryūkyūan branch is divided into Amami and Okinawa sub-branches, and the Southern Ryūkyūan branch is divided into Miyako, Yaeyama, and Yonaguni sub-branches:

奄美沖縄方言：   Amami-Okinawa dialects:
　　　奄美方言   　　Amami dialect
　　　沖縄方言   　　Okinawa dialect
先島方言：   Sakishima dialects:
　　　宮古方言   　　Miyako dialect
　　　八重山方言   　　Yaeyama dialect
　　　与那国方言   　　Yonaguni dialect

Nakamoto (『琉球方言音韻の研究』 *Ryūkyū-hōgen On'in no Kenkyū*, 1976) is based on Hirayama (1966), but he further subdivides the Amami group into a Northern Amami group and a Southern Amami group, based on the 'noticeable north-south difference in Amami'. The following classification is based on Nakamoto (1984):

　　　北琉球：
　　　　奄美
　　　　　　北奄美…奄美大島北部・奄美大島南部（瀬戸内）・徳之島・
　　　　　　　　喜界島北部
　　　　　　南奄美…喜界島南部・沖永良部島・与論島
　　　　沖縄
　　　　　　北沖縄…沖縄本島北部・伊江島・津堅島・久高島
　　　　　　南沖縄…沖縄本島中南部・久米島・慶良間諸島・粟国島・伊
　　　　　　　　平屋島・伊是名島
　　　南琉球：
　　　　　　宮古…宮古島及び来間島・大神島・池間島・伊良部島・多良間島
　　　　　　八重山…石垣島・竹富島・新城島・小浜島・西表島・波照間島・
　　　　　　　　黒島・鳩間島
　　　　　　与那国…与那国島

Northern Ryūkyū:
    Amami
        Northern Amami…Northern Amami Ōshima · Southern
                Amami (Setouchi) · Tokunoshima ·
                Northern Kikai
        Southern Amami…Southern Kikai · Okinoerabu · Yoron
    Okinawa
        Northern Okinawa…Northern Okinawa Main-island · Ieshima ·
                Tsuken · Kudaka
        Southern Okinawa…Central and Southern Okinawa Main-
                island · Kume · Kerama Islands · Aguni ·
                Iheya · Izena
Southern Ryūkyū:
    Miyako…Miyako & Kurima · Ōgami · Ikema · Irabu · Tarama
    Yaeyama…Ishigaki · Taketomi · Aragusuku · Kobama · Iriomote ·
        Hateruma · Kuroshima · Hatoma
    Yonaguni…Yonaguni

The reason for splitting the Amami group into Northern Amami branch and Southern Amami branch is because of the vowel system processed by the dialects in each group: the members of the northern group have a seven vowel system /i ï e ë a o u/, and the members of the southern group have a five vowel system /i e a o u/ ('Northern Kikai' means the three villages of 小野津 Onotsu, 志戸桶 Shidōke and 佐手久 Sateku in the far north which has the seven vowel system. 'Southern Kikai' means the rest of the island). Concerning the affiliation of the dialects of Izena and Iheya islands, Uemura (1963) specifically points out that the dialects of these two islands off the coast of northern Okinawa belong to the Northern Okinawa branch. Nakamoto (1976) also recognise this fact, but he explains that the dialects of the two islands are Northern Okinawa dialects which are 'Southernised'. These two dialects did not retained the proto-phoneme *p as /p/, unlike other typical Northern Okinawa dialects. The reflex of the proto-phoneme *p is /h/ in these two dialects, similar to the Southern Okinawa dialects.

Not all classifications make a two way (Amami and Okinawa) branching under the Northern Ryūkyūan node. In a later publication, Uemura (「琉球方言入門」 'Ryūkyū-hōgen Nyūmon', in 『言語生活』 *Gengo Seikatsu*, 1972) proposed a three-way distinction within the Northern Ryūkyūan group:

奄美沖縄方言群：　　　　　　　Amami-Okinawa dialect group:
　大島徳之島グループ　　　　　　Ōshima-Tokunoshima group
　沖えらぶ北沖縄グループ　　　　Okinoerabu-Northern Okinawa group
　沖縄中南部諸方言　　　　　　　Central-South Okinawa dialects

This three-way grouping is based on the following facts (Karimata, 2000, after Uemura, 1992):

1. Amami Ōshima and Tokunoshima has two types of central vowels (/ï ĕ/), which does not exist in other two groups.

2. The syllables /ka, ke, ko/ in standard Japanese usually corresponds with a syllable which has an /h/ onset in the Okinoerabu-Northern Okinawa group (but /k-/ for the other groups).

3. The consonant /h/ in standard Japanese usually corresponds to bilabial consonants like /p/ or /ɸ/ in the Okinoerabu-Northern Okinawa group.

There are a number of problems with these criteria. For instance, the so-called 'Northern Kikai' dialects in Nakamoto's classification (1976), although having the central vowels (thus making it a member of the 'Amami-Tokunoshima' group based on the first criterion), these dialects also satisfy criteria two and three (like the rest of Kikai Island), thus making it a member of the 'Okinoerabu-Northern Okinawa' group. In some localities which is generally perceived as 'Northern Okinawa', like 久志 Kushi (within the boundary of Nago city in modern political division) and 恩納 Onna,

/k/ in standard Japanese does corresponds with /k/ in these dialects, thus failing criterion two for being a Northern Okinawa dialect.

The two-division (Amami-Okinawa) classification is also not problems-free. One of the criteria used by Nakamoto (1990) for the two-branch distinction is that the Amami dialects have two different endings for the basic verb form, called the *ri*-form and the *mu*-form, e.g. 諸鈍 Shodon (加計呂麻 Kakeroma Island): /kakjur/ vs /kakjum/ 'write'. Okinawa dialects only possess the *mu*-form, e.g. Shuri /katʃuN/. Kikai and Yoron Islands in the northern and southern end of the Amami Island group also possess these two forms, but Okinoerabu in between lacks the *ri*-form, e.g. 知名 China and 和泊 Wadomari, the two representative dialects of Okinoerabu, only have the *mu*-from: /hakjumu/, /hatʃumu/ (Karimata, 2000).

Obviously, classifying based on phonological or grammatical criteria can be problematic. Phonological and grammatical features can be borrowed from languages to languages relatively easily, and classifications based on these features can be unstable because of the true genetic boundaries being blurred by excessive borrowings of structural features, or on-going internal linguistic changes. The only reliable classification methods are those which are based on the evolutionary history of the languages involved, similar biological classifications. Genealogy does not change. One way of tracing ancestry is to look for common innovations in the vocabularies, especially with lexical items where irregular changes has occurred. Dialects which share these irregularities are likely to share a more immediate common ancestor.

[handwritten margin note: often "simplifications" in some sense, the direction of which is limited to only one or two possible paths, so innovations in shared such cases are quite possibly parallel developments.]

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