The case system of Old Japanese: The function of wo

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Modern Japanese is uncontroversially regarded as a language with an accusative case-marking system, but the case-marking system of Old Japanese (OJ, mainly 8th century) is still a matter of some debate. Since the late 1990ies, suggestions have been made that the case-marking system in OJ is at least to some extent ergative (Yanagida, Forthcoming-a; Yanagida, Forthcoming-b) or active (Vovin, 1997). Others have suggested that OJ is an accusative language, but that the direct object was assigned either abstract case or morphological case, depending on the inflected verb form (Miyagawa, 1989; Miyagawa & Ekida, 2003). In all of these accounts, wo, the ancestor of the Modern Japanese accusative marker o, plays a significant role. In this talk, we will use important OJ material which is not usually taken into account to show that the distribution of wo is not only entirely compatible with an accusative case marking system, but also that it is different from previous accounts, which are based mainly on data from the Man’yüshū.

It is well-known that objects in OJ can be unmarked or marked by wo. This is illustrated in (1) - (2). Miyagawa (1989) and Miyagawa & Ekida (2003) have argued that the distribution of unmarked and wo-marked objects is predictable and depends on the inflected form of the predicate. However, their investigation of OJ was limited to the Man’yüshū. Our study of the two prose(-like) text sets from OJ, the Norito (liturgies) and Senmyō (imperial edicts), shows that the distribution of unmarked and wo-marked objects is different from that of Man’yüshū and that Miyagawa & Ekida’s claim is not borne out. A second observation that emerges from our study is that objects marked with wo are much more frequent than Matsuo’s (1938) investigation of the Man’yüshū shows. Based on the distribution of wo-marked and unmarked objects in the Norito and Senmyō, and supported by evidence from kanbun kundoku, we propose that all object NPs can be marked by wo, but that it is optional in certain contexts, most notably when the object is adjacent to the verb.

When the overall distribution of wo is examined as a part of the OJ case-marking system, it becomes clear that there are no systematic exceptions to wo being an accusative marker. We thus claim that wo was neither a marker of inactive subjects (Vovin, 1997), nor an oblique case marker (Yanagida, Forthcoming-b), but simply an accusative case marker in OJ, as in later stages of the language. We also account, in a straightforward way conforming to the use of the accusative case in many other languages, for apparent counter-examples to this claim, such as (3) - (6). Thus (3) is a major object construction, (4) an accusative durational adverbia, (5) a traversal object and (6) a construction derived from the one in (3).
Examples:

(1) ko-no take-ni pire puri-kyerasi
DEM-GEN peak-LOC scarf wave-MODPST.PRESUMP.CONCL
‘(Sayohime) presumably waved (her) scarf on this peak’
MYS 5.873

(2) saywopimye-ga ko-no yama-no pe-ni pire-wo puri-kye-mu
Sayohime-GEN DEM-GEN mountain-GEN top-LOC scarf-ACC wave-SMPLPST-CONJ.CONCL
‘Sayohime probably waved (her) scarf on the top of this mountain’
MYS 5.872

(3) tukapematuri-masap-yeru koto-wo-namo katazikena-mi iswosi-mi omoposi-masu
serve-HON-STAT.ADN COMP-ACC-EMP awesome-INF2 diligent-INF2 think-HON
‘(we) think of the services (you) have done as awesome and diligent’
Senmyô 52.6

(4) aki-kaze-no samuki asake-wo sanu-no woka kwoyu-ramu kimi
autumn-wind-GEN cold.ADN dawn-ACC Sanu-GEN hill cross-PCONJ.ADN lord
‘my lord who will cross the hill of Sanu during dawn (when) the autumn wind is cold’
MYS 3.361

(5) ado-no minatwo-wo kogi-sugwi-te
Ado-GEN estuary-ACC row-pass-GER
‘having rowed past the Ado estuary’
MYS 9.1737

(6) imo-wo nikuku-ara-ba pito-duma yuwe-ni kwopwi-me ya-mo
wife-ACC unpleasant-exist-COND person-wife because love-COND.EXCL Q-EMP
‘if the wife were unpleasant, do (I) love (her) because (she) is someone else’s wife?’
MYS 1.21

References: