Given the hypothesis that Ryukyuan split from Japanese before the 8th century, as argued forcefully by Pellard (forthcoming), then Ryukyuan should have been immune to the reanalysis of Nidan (bigrade) verbs that occurred in Japanese after the posited split with Ryukyuan. However, across the Ryukyuan language group, we find that cognates of the Nidan verbs resemble the Modern Japanese forms that resulted from this later reanalysis, by which they came to resemble Ichidan (monograde) verbs. This surface similarity between Ryukyuan and Modern Japanese is observed by Hattori (1977), who argues that it results from an independent development in Ryukyuan whereby the simple present (non-past) verb forms are derived from a more complex construction, in which the continuative (renyou) form of the verb combines with the existential verb.

While Hattori's historical analysis of Ryukyuan simple present verb forms is well-motivated for Northern Ryukyuan (Okinawan and Amami), it is rather less clear that the analysis can be applied to the Southern Ryukyuan languages, as argued by Genuardi (2008). For example, it seems that the simple present verb forms of Yaeyaman, unlike those of Northern Ryukyuan, correspond directly to the simple present verb forms of Old Japanese, and are not derived by the historical process argued for by Hattori and others. Nevertheless, Yaeyaman cognates of Old Japanese Nidan verbs look on the surface like the reanalyzed forms found in Modern Japanese.

This fact presents a puzzle, given the early split between Proto-Ryukyuan and Proto-Japanese. I present an analysis that, contra Hattori, preserves the direct correspondence between Southern Ryukyuan and Old Japanese simple present verb forms, and derives the surface similarity between Ryukyuan and Modern Japanese Nidan verbs from an independent change that occurred in Proto-Ryukyuan: the raising of mid vowel /e/ to the high vowel /i/. I show that this change, when combined with Nishiyama's (2000) Optimality Theoretic analysis of the morphophonology of Old Japanese Ichidan and Nidan verbs, naturally derives a Ryukyuan-internal collapse of the Ichidan-Nidan distinction, with Nidan verbs taking on the appearance of Ichidan verbs. The result is superficially similar to the change that occurred in Japanese, but was an independent development that occurred for Ryukyuan-internal reasons, consistent with the hypothesis that Proto-Ryukyuan split from Japanese well before the Japanese-internal collapse of the Ichidan and Nidan verbal paradigms.

REFERENCES