A note on Old Japanese worogamu / ‘orogamu をろがむ

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This note is a more detailed version of section 9 of my paper: “More on Japanese /r/ : a response to Pellard”, published in the Journal of East Asian Linguistics 26, 2017, which can be accessed through the following link:

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According to Unger (1976:32) there was a productive process in Early Japanese whereby the first mora of a verb root was doubled to form a new root with extended meaning, as in tuke- ‘attach’ / tutuke- ‘continue’, or yam- ‘sick’ / yayam- ‘be troubled’. Unger proposes to add to this list the verbs wogam- ‘bow’ / worogam- ‘revere’, utape- ‘appeal’ / urutape- ‘id.’, name- ‘line up’ / narabe- ‘id.’ And i- ‘mint, cast’ / ir- ‘scorch’ (the transcription’s are Unger’s). He then argues that the exact reduplication of an r beginning initial syllable should be reconstructed for these forms, i.e. *rogam- / *rorogam-, *rutape- / *rurutape-, *rabe- / *rarabe-, *ri- / *riri-. The initial */r/ would have later changed to zero before /i/, to /w/ before /o/ and /u/ and to /n/ before /a/ word initially. As a result of these rules, no OJ word begins with /r/.

These examples are important for the Hr hypothesis, because if Unger’s hypothesis is correct, it would mean that /r/ could occur at the beginning of autonomous words in pre OJ, thus weakening the Hr hypothesis developed in Labrune (2014, 2017).

In Labrune (2014), I argued for an alternative analysis. First, I assumed that the pair name- / narabe- does not belong to the pattern under discussion and should be left apart. This is because name- / narabe- displays a consonant alternation between /m/ and /b/ which makes the correspondence less direct than in the other pairs, and moreover, it is not clear why /r/ would change to /n/ rather than to zero before /a/ but not before other vowels as in the three other

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1 The Hr, or r-hypothesis, refers to the hypothesis developed in my 2014 paper, and which can be summarized as follows: /r/ behaves as a special, unmarked consonant in Japanese. Its special status in the language reflects its diachronic late emergence as a default, epenthetic consonant in intervocalic position in Proto-Japanese, out of the zero consonant.
doublets. For the three other pairs of verbs, I follow Unger in considering that worogam-, utape- and ir- were derived through reduplication of the initial mora, but I posit instead that the original roots were *'ogam-, *'utape- and *'i-, rather than *rogam-, *rutape- and *ri-, with a zero initial represented by /'/. By virtue of the ’ → r / V _ V rule, which the Hr claims to have applied in Proto-Japanese, *'ogam-, *'utape- and *'i- underwent the following changes:

*’ogam- > *’o’ogam- > ’orogam-

*’utape- > *’u’utape- > ’urutape-

*’i- > *’i’i- > ’ir(i)-

This re-analysis has been criticized by Pellard (2016:369). According to him, “both OJ wogam- and woro2gam- clearly had an initial glide w- distinct from the zero onset, and that consonant cannot be considered to be an artifact of transcription. The reality of the initial w is uncontroversial and well supported […].”

However, Pellard’s assertion is not correct. The problem of the exact nature of the opposition represented by the distinctive use of the two kana オ and ヲ or their man’yōgana correspondents in OJ and EMJ is highly complex. The reality of the supposed w-initial before o is controversial and actually not well supported by philological evidence, contrary to Pellard’s claim. The phonetic and phonological values of initial ヲ and オ, the initial moras which are transcribed by means of the kana romanizations wo and o in most modern transcriptions of OJ, are notoriously very uncertain. Many confusions between these two moras are encountered in OJ and EMJ texts in word-initial position (Arisaka 1955:645, Konno 2001:458, Seeley 1991:111), so the orthographic problem is real. The w in the ヲ mora must indeed be considered an artefact of transcription in many cases.2

Furthermore, Pellard erroneously assumes in his paper that the modern location of ヲ and オ in the kana syllabaries, the former in the w-column, the latter in the ’-column, and their conventional modern Romanization as wo and o reflects their ancient phonemic values.

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2 In order to avoid the misleading transcriptions wo, ò, œ, o, ’ò, ’œ, ’o, I will use as often as possible the two katakana letters ヲ and オ in the following discussion, respecting the traditional Japanese orthography, even though this orthography is not always fully reliable. When this is not possible, I will use a double transcription wo / ’o, to signify the impossibility to affect one phonological value or the other to the kana letters. So I shall transcribe worogamu’orogamu, to remind readers that both interpretations of the orthographic form ミロガム are possible.
However, ｵ and ヲ were both pronounced identically as [wo] until the Edo period as a result of their merging around the middle of the 9th century. The problem is that we do not know for certain what their exact distinct phonemic values were before that. In the so-called Teika orthography (first half of the 13th century), ヲ and ｵ were even distinctively used to denote accentual differences, not phonemic ones, so that ヲ was employed to represent an initial high-pitched “wo” mora, and ｵ to represent an initial low-pitched “wo” mora (by Teika’s time, ヲ and ｵ had both merged to [wo] and there was no plain “o” mora, cf. Seeley 1991:111, Frellesvig 2010:174). The distinction between the two phonetic and phonemic entities represented by means of ヲ and ｵ was thus lost very early in the history of Japanese, and the presence of the ヲ or ｵ kana at the beginning of a word cannot be assumed to reflect the presence or absence of the semi-consonant /w/ before the /o/ vowel.

Pellard further claims (Pellard 2016: 369) that “in the Kojiki (712) OJ wo is always transcribed by Chinese characters with an initial *w-, and OJ ‘o by characters with an initial *ʔ.” However, the problem with this argument is that the lemma *worogamu / *orogamu is not attested in the Kojiki, so Kojiki evidence is totally irrelevant here. The most ancient attestation of this verb in man’yōgana spelling is found in the Nihonshoki, where it is written 烏呂餓瀰 (wo / ‘o - ro - ga - mi). It is not attested under man’yōgana spelling in the Man’yōshū. It is crucial to note that the initial mora of 烏呂餓瀰 is not represented by the standard /wo-/man’yōgana 乎, whose initial was *w- (*y- in Old Chinese), but by 鳥 whose initial in Old Chinese was *ʔ, not *w nor *y (Wenck 1954: 319). Starostin (2005) reconstructs *ʔâ in Pre-Classic Old Chinese and *ʔo in Middle Chinese for 鳥, while Baxter & Sagart (2014) posit three different Old Chinese reconstructions: *qʕa, *[ʔ]ʕa and *ʔʕa, none of them starting with a velar glide. Wenck (1954:312) also observes that the different man’yōgana used in OJ sources to represent what would later be transcribed as ヲ occupy different positions in what he calls the “Chinese - Sino-Japanese” phonic system. It is thus extremely difficult to assess their exact phonetic and phonemic values in Old Japanese texts.

In Labrune (2017), I also assume that the ヲ/ｵ distinction may have consisted in the A-type / B-type distinction (the so-called kô 甲 / otsu 乙 distinction in the Japanese philological tradition), so that the two vowels represented by these two kana would have been the onsetless ‘o1 and ‘o2. Pellard (2016:370) seems to accept this assumption, since he writes that “since o1 and o2 are often thought to have differed in labialization, that interpretation might be
valid”. However, he goes on stating that “but it crucially misses the fact that it is \(o_1\) and not \(o_2\), which is reconstructed as labialized”.

Precisely: my proposal rests on the assumption that the initial mora in *worogamu/*orogamu must be reconstructed as \(o_2\) (with the non-labialized member of the opposition). This is because, considering the fact that in 烏呂餓瀰 the \(o\) mora is clearly \(ro_2\), i.e the B-type vowel (\(\ddot{o}\)), the preceding vowel can also be nothing other than the B-type vowel \(o_2\) (\(\ddot{o}\)), by virtue of Arisaka’s Law, which prevented the A and B versions of two \(o\)-moras to occur in the same root. So Pellard is wrong when he assumes (page 370) that the initial mora of ヌロガム cannot be analyzed as /'o2/, because if the initial mora of ヌロガム was the A-type /'o1/ as Pellard argues, then the word would be an exception to Arisaka’s Law.

My approach is entirely consistent with that of Mabuchi who posits that the B-type “o” mora belonged to the \(a\)-column series (the zero onset ‘‘series) while the A-type “o” mora belonged to the \(w\)-column series (Mabuchi 1971:33-34, 62; 1999: 125, 149). It is also totally compatible with the analysis by different scholars of A-type “o” as \(o_1\) (\(o\) for Ohno 1990, Arisaka 1955, Hattori 1959; \(wo\) for Frellesvig and Whitman 2008:4, Vovin 2005:40) and B-type “o” as \(o_2\) (\(\ddot{o}\) for Ohno 1990, \(\ddot{o}\) for Frellesvig and Whitman 2008:4, \(\ddot{o}\) for Vovin 2005:40 who states that the prevalent modern view on Western Old Japanese vocalism is that the A-type “o” was \(wo\) and the B-type “o” was \(\ddot{o}\) - which most Japanese linguists usually transcribe as \(\ddot{o}\), but what we should retain is that the B type is not preceded by the glide \(w\).

Pellard’s error in this passage resembles that of a modern French college pupil who would assume that Ancient Attic Greek had the [u] sound, because the sequence ou in the Greek alphabet is rendered by \(ou\) in the Latin one, and the orthographic combination o+u is pronounced [u] in Modern French!

Thus, the reconstruction of *‘o2gam- > * ‘o2’o2gam- > ‘o2ro2gam-*, with \(r\) epenthesis in the \(V\ V\) context is perfectly plausible, because the initial orthographical \(\dagger\) does not necessarily represent the mora [wo] as Pellard wrongly assumes.

Pellard also writes that “the grapheme \(wo\) is always classified with \(wa\), \(wi\) and \(we\) in ancient syllabaries” (Pellard 2016: 369). This is simply false (cf. Konno 2001:390, or Frellesvig 2010:178). As Frellesvig observes, many incorrect assignations of \(\dagger\) and \(\ddot{o}\) are reported in the syllabaries.
References