S. Robert Ramsey is an American linguist who has worked on the phonology and morphology of various Asian languages, in particular Japanese and Korean. He studied at Yale University with Professor Samuel Martin and his dissertation (1975) investigated the accent of Korean dialects including Middle Korean, which was spoken on the Korean peninsula during the 15–16th centuries. In this study, he discovered and documented the regular correspondences of accent between the contemporary Korean dialects (the Hamkyeng dialect in North Korea and the Kyengsang dialect in South Korea) and Middle Korean. He also discovered a surprisingly strong correlation between particular segmental stem shapes and the stem’s accent class in Middle Korean. Based on these findings, Ramsey reconstructed the phonological system of Proto-Korean as a language without distinctive accentual contrasts, and explained the process of an establishment of pitch-accent systems in various dialects as a result of a series of historical developments from this original predictable accent state.

This significant work was published as a book “Accent and Morphology in Korean Dialects: A Descriptive and Historical Study” from Tower Press (Seoul) in 1978. This book and several subsequent papers (Ramsey 1986, 1991, 2001) have had a significant impact on the field of Korean historical linguistics. These works laid a solid foundation for the study of Korean historical linguistics and accent, and many researches that were influenced by his works have appeared since then. Ramsey also worked on Japanese accent and proposed a novel hypothesis with regard to its historical development.

After teaching at Columbia University (1975–1984) and the University of Pennsylvania (1983–1984), Ramsey became professor of East Asian linguistics at the University of Maryland. He received the Order of Culture from the Korean government in 2013 for his great contributions to promote linguistic research on Korean worldwide.


In order to celebrate Professor Ramsey’s research, we held an international symposium on Japanese/Korean accent from historical perspectives at the Tokyo University of Foreign
Studies on 2–3 July 2016. 16 invited speakers presented papers on this topic, and c. 70 people participated in the symposium. There was lively discussion in all sessions, showing that this is still a topic attracting many people’s interest. The current issue of the journal “Journal of Asian and African Studies” collects a subset of the papers that were presented in this symposium. The seven papers include: “Universals of tone rules and diachronic change in Japanese” by Elisabeth de Boer, “Accent shift in Japanese and Korean” by Rei Fukui, “On the historical position of the Gairin type accent” by Tatsuya Hirako, “Biased questions in South Kyeongsang Korean: A preliminary study” by Hyun Kyung Hwang, “The lexical accent of surnames in Kyengsang Korean: A study in analogy” by Michael Kenstowicz and Hyang-Sook Sohn, “The role of foot structure in Korean accent systems” by Clemens Poppe, and “On Hattori’s hypothesis: Does shortening of long vowels produce an accent kernel?” by Zendo Uwano. I briefly review each of these papers below.

“Universals of tone rules and diachronic change in Japanese” by Elisabeth de Boer is a good introduction to the theory of the tonal reconstruction of Middle Japanese, with a detailed explanation of two competing hypotheses with regard to this topic. After pointing out several problems in the “standard” reconstruction proposed by Kindaichi 1951, 1954, where the Tokyo-type tone systems are assumed to have developed as a result of rightward tone shift from the Kyoto-type, the paper argues that the reversed reconstruction of the Middle Japanese tone system, which was originally proposed by Ramsey 1979, can explain the diachronic development of the modern Japanese dialects better: this reversed reconstruction postulates that the Kyoto-type tone systems arose from the Tokyo-type tone systems by leftward tone shift. By citing parallel cases reported in various African languages, the paper argues that the changes required by Ramsey’s reconstruction are more natural from a typological perspective, compared to the standard reconstruction that involves numerous unnatural tonal developments which must have occurred multiple times, all over Japan.

“Accent shift in Japanese and Korean” by Rei Fukui tries to show that the historical accent change in Japanese was by rightward accent shift while that in Korean was by leftward accent shift, based on various phenomena such as synchronically irregular accentual behaviors and borrowings. New data from the Hida Hagiwara dialect is provided as supporting evidence for the hypothesis of the author, which gives an important clue to examine the issue of the direction in the historical sound change in Japanese. The discussion on the possible period of the divergence of the Kyengsang dialect of Korean is also valuable.

“On the historical position of the Gairin type accent” by Tatsuya Hirako reports the merger patterns of the accent classes in the Gairin type accent in the Mikawa and Izumo areas. Based on the merger patterns, he proposes that the Gairin-type accent should be divided into two sub categories: “Uchi-Gairin type” and “Soto-Gairin type”. In the former, represented by Mikawa and Izumo, accent classes III-6 and III-7 have not merged, whereas in the latter, represented by the Tohoku and Kyushu areas, classes III-6 and III-7 have completely merged. He also argues that accent class III-7 should be divided into two
subclasses based on more or less regular correspondences observed between the Uchi-Gairin type accent and the Nairin- or Churin-type accent. A new hypothesis with regard to the historical position of the two Gairin type accents is proposed based on the data discussed in this paper, while taking into account the geographical distributions of the accent types.

Hwang’s paper “Biased questions in South Kyeongsang Korean: A preliminary study” examines a correlation between certain prosodic patterns and speakers’ bias in negative questions in South Kyeongsang Korean by conducting two experiments. The author shows that negative or neutral bias versus positive bias are signaled by different phrasing patterns. The paper also finds that the correlation in South Kyeongsang is not as strong as that observed in Tokyo Japanese, and postulates the possible cause for this state of affairs in the availability of a competing positive bias as well as a change-in progress in the Double Phrasing pattern in South Kyeongsang Korean.

“The lexical accent of surnames in Kyengsang Korean: A study in analogy” by Michael Kenstowicz and Hyang-Sook Sohn is the first study to systematically investigate the accent of surnames in Kyengsang Korean, by taking into account their historical development and dialectal differences. It examines the lexical accent of surnames in the North and South Kyengsang dialects of Korean with a comparison to Middle Korean, and finds different distributional patterns between the two Kyengsang dialects, which are attributed to differences in their phrasal phonologies. In Korean, the surname is typically a monosyllabic Sino-Korean morpheme, and is not used in isolation as a rule. Reflecting this fact of usage, the accent of surnames shows different tendencies from ordinary Sino-Korean words. In South Kyengsang, an accentual restructuring from the expected Rise class to the High-Low class is observed, which is due to analogical leveling based on the surface low tones found on the surnames in a phrasal collocation. North Kyengsang, on the other hand, lacks such a restructuring since the Rise class remains distinct from the other two accent classes in the phrasal collocation.

“The role of foot structure in Korean accent systems” by Clemens Poppe tries to analyze the accent systems in various different dialects of Korean (Middle Korean, North/ South Kyengsang, Yanbian, Seoul) from the perspective of foot structure. The paper argues that there are two types of dialects in Korean based on their foot structure: those with a preference for iambic feet (Middle Korean, Yanbian Korean, Seoul Korean), and those with a preference for trochaic feet (Kyengsang Korean). Also, it proposes that the so-called Kyengsang accent shift can be accounted for in terms of a change from a preference for iambic feet to a preference for trochaic feet.

In “On Hattori’s hypothesis: Does shortening of long vowels produce an accent kernel?”, Zendo Uwano examines the hypothesis by Shiro Hattori that a shortening of long vowels has produced an accent kernel, which is based on data from Ainu and Ryukyuan. The paper argues that the accent kernels had already arisen during the stage while long vowels still existed, and only after which vowel shortening occurred. It proposes that more detailed conditions should be specified in order for accent kernels or tonal registers to be produced as a result of a shortening of long vowels. Furthermore, it reconstructs the
phonological system of Proto-Ainu that is also different from the hypothesis by Hattori.

In sum, the papers in this volume demonstrate that the study of the accents of the Japanese and Korean languages encompasses a wide range of topics and that it constitutes an integral part of the linguistic research on these two languages.

I thank Professor Ramsey and all the guest speakers for giving precious lectures in the symposium. I am also grateful to everyone who participated. I hope that this symposium has laid a foundation for future interaction and collaborations in the study of accent in both Japanese and Korean.

References