The Synchrony and Diachrony of Voiced Obstruents in Japanese

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In Japanese, when a word beginning with a voiceless obstruent appears as the second member of a compound, the obstruent is frequently voiced:

(1) a. k → g: kana ‘kana script’ → hira-gana ‘cursive kana’
   b. s → z: suji ‘sushi’ → maki-suji ‘rolled sushi’

Such alternations can be accounted for by a morphologically-triggered voicing rule (called *Rendaku* ‘sequential voicing’). A well-known puzzle is that, when *h* or one of its allophones undergoes *Rendaku*, it also changes manner (and place) of articulation to become *b*:

(2) a. h → b: hare ‘fair weather’ → nihon-bare ‘ideal weather’
   b. ç → b: çito ‘person’ → tabi-bito ‘traveler’
   c. φ → b: futon ‘futon’ → kake-b futon ‘comforter’

The traditional solution from McCawley (1968) is to assume that *h* and its allophonic variants are underlyingly *p* (thus *pare, pito*, and *puton* for the input words in (2)), to which *Rendaku* applies and derives *b*.

This talk proposes an alternative analysis to McCawley’s, providing support from an elicited production experiments as well as the close examination of several intertwined historical facts. This investigation leads us to the conclusion that fortition and lenition of the voiced obstruents in Japanese took place on a much larger scale than generally considered, and that the effects have been inherited by modern Japanese in a rather twisted way.

Reference:

BIO
Yoshihisa Kitagawa is Professor of Linguistics, a faculty member at East Asian Studies Center, and an associate member of the Cognitive Science Program at Indiana University. He received his Ph.D. in Linguistics from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst in 1986. His research interests include syntactic theory and its interaction with prosody and semantics/pragmatics, sentence processing for prosody-information correlations, morphology-syntax interaction, and Japanese linguistics. He is the co-editor of Lingua 124 Special issue Prosody at the Grammatical Crossroads — Japanese and Beyond (with S. Tomioka) and the author of the forthcoming Handbook of Japanese Syntax chapter “Interfacing syntax with sounds and meanings” (M. Shibatani and S. Miyagawa, eds., De Gruyter Mouton). He has also published Seisei-bonpoo-no kangaekata [Ways of thinking in Generative Grammar] with A. Ueyama (Kenkyu-sha, Tokyo).