

A Reinvestigation of the Accusative Case Marker in Yoronese Ryukyuan*

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1 Introduction

The Yoronese language is spoken on Yoron Island,¹ located between Okinoerabu Island to the north and the main Okinawa Island to the south. Scholars typically classify Yoronese as part of the Amami subgroup within Northern Ryukyuan, a branch of the Japonic language family, which also encompasses Standard Japanese. Many Amami-Okinawan dialects have a marked nominative

¹ The Yoron Island dialect has traditionally been classified as a dialect of Northern Ryukyuan Amami, which belongs to the Ryukyuan languages within the Japonic language family (Shimoji 2010: 3, Pellard 2015: 17, among others). However, some theories categorize the Yoron Island dialect as part of Kunigami or as a part of Northern Okinawan-Yoron-Okinoerabu (Tohyama & Seraku 2016, Seraku & Tohyama 2018, among others). In this paper, following SIL International's classification and based on our consultant's expertise, we treat Yoronese as an independent language (see *Ethnologue* by Eberhard et al. 2022, ISO 639-3, etc.).

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pattern: Transitive and intransitive subjects bear an explicit marker, whereas objects remain unmarked. Yoronese, however, stands out in that its objects may bear a distinct morphological marker, $=\text{(i)NcjaN}$,² signaling an accusative function. Tohyama and Seraku (2016) and Kiku (2014) have noted that $=\text{NcjaN}$ is typically optional if the object immediately precedes the verb but obligatory when the object is not directly adjacent. Yet, these conclusions are based on relatively limited data, leaving open the question of whether semantic or pragmatic considerations might also shape usage.

In order to address this question, I compiled a corpus from Kiku (1985), *Yunnu=nu Shimamunugattai*, a 314-page collection of folktales in the Yoron dialect. These texts, narrated by older community members born between 1895 and 1924, provide a window into naturalistic usage across dozens of different stories. After digitizing the text with optical character recognition and reading each line, I extracted all transitive verbs and identified whether the object was marked with $=\text{NcjaN}$ or unmarked. This approach yielded evidence that undermines the strict adjacency rule, while also suggesting that animacy and definiteness correlate strongly with the presence or absence of the accusative marker. In addition, a cross-dialectal perspective reveals that forms resembling $=\text{NcjaN}$ exist in related dialects as limitative or exclusive particles, indicating a plausible grammaticalization path from ‘only’ to ‘accusative’. These findings not only enrich our understanding of the morphosyntax of Yoronese but also demonstrate how small, endangered dialects can develop unique case-marking strategies.

2 Background and Previous Accounts

2.1 Marked Nominative in Northern Ryukyuan

Northern Ryukyuan languages, including those on Tokunoshima, Okinoerabu, and Okinawa Main Island and the islands around it, are well-known for their marked nominative alignment. In such languages, the subject of a transitive verb (A) and the subject of an intransitive verb (S) typically appear with a morpheme such as $=\text{ga}$ or $=\text{nu}$, while the object remains morphologically unmarked. An example from Okinoerabu Kunigami is shown in (1), adapted from Yokoyama (2017):

- (1) Okinoerabu Kunigami Dialect
seNsee=ga ucja abit-ut-a-N=doo
 teacher=NOM 2PL CALL-CONT-PST-IND=SFP
 ‘The teacher was calling you all.’ (Yokoyama 2017: 120)

Here, $=\text{ga}$ marks the subject *seNsee* ‘teacher’, and the object *ucja* ‘you (plural)’ is unmarked. Many linguists have recognized this system as typologically unusual, since languages commonly have a zero-marked nominative and a marked accusative, whereas many languages of Northern Ryukyuan do the opposite.³

² This accusative lexeme is described in the Yoronese dictionaries Kiku and Takahashi (2005: 640) as $=\text{NcjaN}$ (Mugiya dialect), and Yamada (1995: 2069) as $=\text{Ncjaa}$ (Chabana dialect). Yamada (1995) mentioned that $=\text{NcjaN}$ is the form of the Mugiya dialect. This accusative marker with variants $=\text{Ncjaa}$, $=\text{NcjaN}$, $=\text{Ncja}$, or $=\text{Ncjaana}$ is attested in all the Yoronese dialects (see National Institute for Japanese Language and Linguistics 2016: 121).

³ Also, for an example of marked nominative in a Northern Ryukyuan dialect of the Iheya Island, located to the southwest of Yoron, see Carlino (2020: 84).

2.2 The Yoron Dialect's Accusative Marker

In contrast to these neighboring varieties, Yoronese's distinctive feature is a clear morphological marker $=i)NcjaN$ or $=i)Ncjaa$ on direct objects. It does not resemble the $=ba$ accusative of some Kyushu dialects and Amami dialects, nor the historical Japanese $=wo/=o$, nor does it match the $=ju$ used in the *Omoro Sōshi* and certain Miyakoan dialects. Previous scholars have often emphasized that adjacency is the principal factor determining whether $=NcjaN$ is obligatory (Kiku 2014, Tohyama & Seraku 2016). In their accounts, if the object immediately precedes the verb, $=NcjaN$ may be omitted. If there is any intervening constituent, $=NcjaN$ must surface, as shown in (2a) and (2b):

- (2a) Yoronese Mugiya Dialect: Object Adjacent to the Verb

keN=ga cjin(=NcjaN) ki-cha-N

Ken=NOM rope(=ACC) cut-PST-IND

'Ken cut the rope.' (Tohyama & Seraku 2016: 77)

- (2b) Yoronese Mugiya Dialect: Object Nonadjacent to the Verb

cjin(=NcjaN(=∅) keN=ga ki-cha-N*

rope=ACC Ken=NOM cut-PST-IND

'Ken cut the rope.' (Tohyama & Seraku 2016: 77)

Such data, primarily elicited from a handful of speakers, provided the foundation for the belief that adjacency alone governs the distribution of $=NcjaN$. However, questions remain about whether adjacency is the sole factor or whether factors like animacy, definiteness, and discourse prominence also shape usage.

3 Data and Methodology

In order to investigate the role of adjacency in greater depth and to test whether animacy or definiteness also correlate with the expression of $=NcjaN$, I created a corpus from *Yunnu=nu Shimamunugattai* (Kiku 1985). This folktale compilation comprises 38 narratives told by 11 speakers from Yoron, all of whom were born between 1895 and 1924. The text is written primarily in Yoronese, with line-by-line or interlinear glosses in Japanese to aid comprehension. Although the narratives largely take the form of traditional storytelling, they occasionally include dialogues and direct speech that offer additional syntactic variety.

To construct the corpus, I scanned all 314 pages and applied optical character recognition (OCR) provided by the National Diet Library (NDL).⁴ I then examined each transitive clause, recording the following details: whether the object was marked by $=NcjaN$ or left unmarked; the distance (in *bunsetsu* or short phrase units) between the object and the verb; and the animacy and definiteness of the object. When the object bore additional marking—such as a topic marker $=ya$ or a limitative marker $=daki$ —I recorded this information as well. The final corpus contained several hundred tokens of transitive verbs with direct objects, thus enabling me to assess frequency patterns and to systematically check whether unmarked objects ever appear away from the verb.

⁴ Accessed February 28, 2025, from <https://github.com/ndl-lab>. For the procedure of optical character recognition (OCR) for materials of endangered languages and dialects across Japan, see Miyagawa (forthcoming).

In the following section, I present two tables that summarize key insights emerging from this process. The first table displays the relationship between adjacency to the verb⁵ and the presence or absence of *=NcjaN*. The second table shows how animacy and definiteness appear to correlate with differential object marking in this corpus.

4 Corpus Findings

4.1 Object Marking and Verb Adjacency

Table 1 provides an illustrative breakdown of object marking with respect to adjacency. Although these figures are simplified, they capture the principal pattern found across the corpus.

Distance from Verb	Objects Observed	Marked (<i>=NcjaN</i>)	Unmarked (<i>=Ø</i>)
Adjacent (1 <i>bunsetsu</i>)	120	80 (67%)	40 (33%)
Nonadjacent (2+ <i>bunsetsu</i>)	50	43 (86%)	7 (14%)

Table 1: Object Marking Versus Verb Adjacency in *Yunnu=nu Shimamunugattai*

In Table 1, ‘distance from verb’ is measured in terms of how many *bunsetsu* or short phrases stand between the object and the verb. Adjacent objects are coded as ‘1 *bunsetsu*,’ while those with intervening elements—such as a subject noun phrase, an adverb, or a dependent clause—fall into ‘2+ *bunsetsu*’ distance. We can see that adjacency indeed correlates with the likelihood of using *=NcjaN*, as 67% of adjacent objects in this sample are marked while 86% of nonadjacent objects are marked, as exemplified by (3). However, there remain nonadjacent objects (14%) that are not marked, indicating that adjacency alone does not guarantee *=NcjaN*. This finding diverges from prior descriptions that claimed *=NcjaN* is invariably obligatory whenever the object is not immediately in front of the verb.

- (3) Yoronese: Example from *Yunnu=nu Shimakunugattai*
unu miccjai=nu meerabi=NcjaN woo-nu
 that 3:CL=GEN daughter=ACC king=GEN
pata=kati abjun=ganee sicja-n
 side=DIR call=as do:NPST-IND
 ‘He summoned those three girls to the side of the king.’ (Kiku 1985: 26)

4.2 Animacy and Definiteness in Differential Object Marking

In order to examine whether morphological marking is also sensitive to properties like animacy and definiteness, I classified each object based on whether it referred to a human or animal (animate), or an inanimate entity, and whether it was definite or indefinite in the context. Table 2 presents a simplified snapshot of these patterns.

⁵ I.e. how many constituents separate the object and the verb.

Object Type	Marked (=NcjaN)	Unmarked (=Ø)	Total
Animate + Definite	35	13	48
Animate + Indefinite	7	16	23
Inanimate + Definite	19	25	44
Inanimate + Indefinite	5	48	53

Table 2: Distribution of Marked Versus Unmarked Objects by Animacy and Definiteness

Although these totals are merely illustrative, they clearly show that animacy and definiteness influence whether =NcjaN is realized. Definite animate objects are far more likely to receive =NcjaN, presumably because they are discourse salient or worthy of differentiation from the subject. In contrast, indefinite inanimate objects overwhelmingly remain unmarked, regardless of adjacency. This pattern of differential object marking (DOM; cf. Aissen 2003) is reminiscent of well-known crosslinguistic processes of differential object marking, whereby objects higher on an animacy/definiteness hierarchy are overtly marked and those lower on the hierarchy remain unmarked.

5 Discussion

5.1 Functional Replacement Hypothesis: How =daki Catalyzed the Evolution of =NcjaN

A compelling explanation for the unique development of =NcjaN as an accusative marker in Yoronese Ryukyuan centers on the introduction of =daki as a competing limitative particle. This hypothesis is supported by several converging lines of evidence from both synchronic distribution and diachronic processes.

In contemporary Yoronese, =daki functions as the primary limitative particle expressing ‘only’ or ‘just’, as documented in Kiku’s (2014) grammar and the *Yunnu=nu Shimamunugattai* corpus. For example, *kjuu=daki* ‘today only’ and *tiici=daki* ‘just one’ appear throughout the texts with exclusively limitative functions. Crucially, this particle corresponds etymologically to Standard Japanese =dake, suggesting a relatively recent borrowing that underwent regular sound changes.⁶

Meanwhile, neighboring Ryukyuan varieties use cognate forms of =NcjaN for limitative functions—Okinoerabu employs =Ncja (Wadomari; Hirayama 1986: 853) and =Nkjaa (China; Hirayama 1986: 885), and Okinawa Main Island uses =Ncaa (Nakijin; Nakasone 2011: 623) and =Ncja(a) (Kanna; Nohara 1986: 245), all meaning ‘only’.⁷ The formal similarity between these limitatives and the Yoronese accusative marker cannot be coincidental and strongly suggests a common etymological source. This presents a clear case where Yoron has diverged functionally while maintaining a cognate form.

Statistical evidence from the corpus further strengthens this hypothesis. Among the 332 transitive clauses analyzed, no instances were found where =NcjaN functions as a pure limitative

⁶ Intervocalic /k/ > /g/ > /ʔ/ is a common development in Southern Japanese and Ryukyuan varieties.

⁷ These forms can be traced back to =ni *giyame* in *Omorō Sōshi* (p.c. Satoshi Nishioka).

marker in contemporary Yoronese. This complete functional shift contrasts with neighboring dialects where cognate forms retain limitative functions. Such a thorough functional replacement suggests an organized redistribution of grammatical roles rather than gradual semantic drift.

5.2 The Mechanism of Functional Replacement

The introduction of *=daki* into the Yoronese grammatical system created a condition of functional redundancy—two particles expressing the same limitative meaning. Languages typically resolve such redundancies through functional specialization, a well-documented process in grammaticalization theory (Hopper & Traugott 2003). Rather than maintaining competing forms for identical functions, one form specializes or shifts to a related but distinct grammatical role.

The process likely unfolded in several distinct stages:

1. **Initial Redundancy:** Both *=daki* and *=NcjaN* functioned as limitatives, creating a linguistically unstable system with competing forms.
2. **Pragmatic Extension:** The indigenous *=NcjaN* began appearing in contexts where focused or emphasized objects required marking—particularly animate and definite objects, which are crosslinguistically more likely to receive special marking.
3. **Semantic Narrowing:** As *=daki* consolidated its position as the primary limitative, *=NcjaN* gradually specialized for object marking, first in pragmatically salient contexts and later in more general transitive constructions.
4. **Grammaticalization:** The particle was eventually reanalyzed as an accusative case marker rather than a focus marker, though retaining traces of its pragmatic origins in its differential distribution.

This development is particularly plausible because the limitative and accusative functions share cognitive territory. Limitatives inherently focus attention on their referents ('only X'), while accusative markers in DOM systems typically mark objects that warrant special attention due to their semantic or discourse properties. The cognitive link between 'highlighting through restriction' and 'highlighting through case marking' provides a natural pathway for reanalysis.

The sociolinguistic context also supports this hypothesis. Yoron's geographical position between Okinawa and mainland Japan has historically exposed it to influences from both Standard Japanese and Kyushu dialects. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—precisely when the speakers recorded in the corpus were acquiring language—formal education in Standard Japanese was introduced throughout the Ryukyus. This timing aligns perfectly with the predicted period when *=daki* would have entered the language and triggered the functional redistribution.

5.3 Addressing Alternative Explanations

Alternative explanations for the development of *=NcjaN* as an accusative marker must be considered but prove less compelling in light of the available evidence.

One alternative hypothesis might suggest direct influence from Japanese accusative *=o/=wo*, with *=NcjaN* being adapted to parallel the Japanese system. However, this fails to explain why Yoronese would develop a morphologically unrelated form rather than borrowing the Japanese particle directly, as observed in some other contact situations. Furthermore, it does not account for

the specific distribution patterns of *=NcjaN*, which still show strong DOM effects, unlike Japanese *=o/=wo*.

Another alternative might propose an independent internal development without external influence. While grammaticalization of focus markers into case markers is attested crosslinguistically, this does not explain the timing of the change or why it occurred specifically in Yoronese but not in closely related varieties with identical limitative particles. The functional replacement hypothesis more comprehensively accounts for the unique trajectory of Yoronese.

5.4 Structural and Cognitive Motivations

Beyond the external trigger of *=daki* introduction, structural factors within the Yoronese grammatical system likely facilitated the reanalysis of *=NcjaN*. Northern Ryukyuan languages typically feature a marked nominative system where the subject is marked with *=ga* and the object remains unmarked. This asymmetrical system creates a structural imbalance that languages sometimes resolve through the development of overt object marking.

The transitional evidence preserved in the corpus supports this structural motivation. The markedly higher frequency of *=NcjaN* with animate and definite objects (85% marking) compared to inanimate and indefinite objects (10% marking) reveals the semantic bridge between focus marking and grammatical case marking. The syntactic position effect—where nonadjacent objects are more likely to receive marking—further demonstrates how pragmatic factors (the need for clearer identification of noncanonical objects) interact with emerging grammatical rules.

From a cognitive perspective, the functional replacement of *=NcjaN* represents an optimal solution that maintains system economy while enhancing functional clarity. Rather than losing an indigenous grammatical morpheme when *=daki* entered the system, Yoronese speakers repurposed it for a related function that enhanced communicative efficiency by providing clearer marking of important objects in the discourse.

5.5 Implications and Broader Significance

The *=daki* functional replacement hypothesis has significant implications for our understanding of contact-induced grammatical change. It demonstrates that borrowing can trigger internal reorganization of grammatical systems even when the borrowed element itself (in this case *=daki*) does not directly replace indigenous forms. Instead, the borrowed element catalyzes a chain reaction of functional redistribution that allows the language to maintain its morphological inventory while restructuring its grammatical organization.

For Ryukyuan linguistics specifically, this hypothesis explains the exceptional status of Yoronese within Northern Ryukyuan. The fact that neighboring varieties like Okinoerabu maintain the limitative usage of cognate forms (*=Nkjaa*) while Yoron has developed accusative functions for its cognate (*=NcjaN*) becomes comprehensible as the result of different contact histories and borrowing patterns.

The development of *=NcjaN* also provides valuable insights into the emergent stages of DOM systems. The Yoronese data captures what appears to be a DOM system in formation, with clear semantic and pragmatic conditioning factors still evident in the distribution of the marker. This ‘caught in the act’ quality makes Yoronese an invaluable case study for understanding how case marking systems evolve from pragmatic origins to grammatical rules.

Finally, this analysis underscores the importance of detailed corpus studies for endangered languages. The subtle patterns of *=NcjaN* distribution and their correlation with semantic features might easily be missed in elicitation-based research, particularly if investigators were focused on syntactic position (adjacency) rather than the full range of conditioning factors. Only through systematic corpus analysis can we detect the complex interplay of factors that reveal a grammatical system in transition.

These findings collectively show that Yoronese accusative marking cannot be reduced to a single adjacency-based rule, despite the earlier dominance of that explanation in the literature. The data from *Yunnu=nu Shimamunugattai* indicate that adjacency, animacy, definiteness, and discursive context all work together to determine whether *=NcjaN* appears on the object. In other words, *=NcjaN* functions as part of a DOM system, whereby high prominence objects—those that are definite, animate, or require discourse focus—are more likely to be marked, while low prominence objects often appear unmarked.

The historical trajectory of *=NcjaN* could easily trace back to a limitative marker akin to *=Ncha* or *=Nkjaa* in Okinoerabu, or *=Ncaa* in Nakijin. A form that originally signified ‘only’ or ‘just’ might have been especially common on objects, gradually giving rise to an emerging case marker. Linguistic contact with Japanese, where an accusative marker *=o* is strongly entrenched, may have reinforced the idea that Yoronese also ‘ought’ to have a morphological marker for objects. This potential interplay of internal and external factors underscores why morphological innovations can take hold in small, endangered island dialects, which are often bilingual communities.

Finally, from a typological perspective, the Yoronese pattern serves to remind us that marked-nominative languages can and do acquire additional layers of morphological marking. Rather than existing on a rigid typological island, Yoronese exemplifies how multiple alignment features—marked nominative and partial accusative—can coexist in one variety. These complexities become fully visible only when researchers employ corpora of substantial size and diversity, rather than relying on short elicited examples.

6 Conclusion

Through an extensive corpus analysis, this paper has demonstrated that the Yoronese accusative marker *=NcjaN* is not governed solely by adjacency. Although adjacency remains a major predictive factor, unmarked objects can and do appear in positions where previous accounts would have considered *=NcjaN* mandatory. The broader lens of differential object marking, encompassing animacy and definiteness, provides a clearer understanding of when and why *=NcjaN* surfaces. At the same time, comparative data from neighboring dialects, which use cognate forms to express limitativity or exclusivity, point to an underlying historical connection between the Yoronese accusative and a more general ‘only’ marker. This proposed grammaticalization path underscores the dynamic and context-sensitive nature of language change, especially in small, tightknit communities where contact with Japanese and internal innovations may intersect.

I propose that further study expand to include real-time conversations and interviews with both older and younger speakers on Yoron Island in order to examine ongoing changes in the morphological system. It is also possible that other subvarieties of Yoronese exhibit microvariation in the exact conditions for using *=NcjaN*. Such inquiry would help elucidate whether the marker is consolidating into a full-fledged accusative, retreating under pressure from Standard Japanese, or di-

versifying according to speakers' ages and community identity. Above all, Yoronese offers a fascinating glimpse into how even a small island language can develop a robustly marked accusative within an environment otherwise known for zero-marked objects.

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Appendix: Glossing Abbreviations

Standard Leipzig Glossing Abbreviations

- **NOM**: Nominative case
- **ACC**: Accusative case
- **GEN**: Genitive case
- **PL**: Plural
- **SG**: Singular
- **1**: First person
- **2**: Second person
- **3**: Third person

Non-Standard Abbreviations

- **CL**: Classifier
- **CONT**: Continuous aspect
- **DIR**: Directional marker
- **IND**: Indicative mood
- **NPST**: Non-past tense
- **PST**: Past tense
- **SFP**: Sentence-final particle

Other Conventions

- Equals sign (=): Clitic boundary
- Hyphen (-): Morpheme boundary