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Foreword and Acknowledgements

The 20th International Conference on Historical Linguistics (ICHL 20) held in Osaka, Japan, 25–30 July 2011 was unique in several ways. Most previous conferences have been held in Europe or in the USA. Although there was one conference held in the Pacific region (ICHL 15 in Melbourne, Australia, in 2002), this was the first such conference to be held in an Asian country, specifically Japan. It was also the first such conference to be hosted by a Museum, in this case the National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka that, in addition to being a museum, also comprises a research institute that has among its more than 60 permanent researchers several linguists interested in historical linguistics. The event was unique also in that it was held under the shadow of the Great East Japan Earthquake and associated disasters, such as the tsunami that claimed more than 20,000 lives and the Fukushima nuclear catastrophe that threatened Japan with radioactive fallout only months before the scheduled conference dates. Much thought was given to the possibility of canceling the conference, but daily readings of radioactive fallout in the Osaka region, clearly indicated that conference participants would not be subjected to any danger, so the decision was made to proceed with the original conference plans. And the international community of historical linguists generally supported the decision, with 239 participants coming from 40 countries, and relatively few cancelling because of the events related to the Earthquake. Including Japanese participants, the total number of people registered was 319, with 309 papers being presented.

Another unique feature of the conference was that one of the workshops focused on Historical Sign Language Database, Architecture and Historical Linguistics Methodology. The plenary speaker associated with this session was Professor Ted Supalla, University of Rochester, a Deaf linguist, who was unable to physically attend the conference, and who presented his paper via an internet connection from New York, using American Sign Language (ASL). Simultaneous interpretation was conducted into English, Japanese Sign Language (JSL), and Japanese. The workshop was also made open to the public, with about 120 participants from the general public attending, including a large number of users of JSL, sign language interpreters, students and researchers in linguistics. Supalla’s presentation on “The Role of Historical Research in Building a Model of Sign Language Typology, Variation, and Change” appears in this volume (pp. 15–42).
Being held in Japan, the conference also provided a suitable venue for discussion of the position of Japanese in respect to other languages of the world. In addition to discussions presented by Jakke Freeland (Oxford) on “Corpus Based Studies of Japanese Historical Linguistics”, and thematic sessions on Ryukyuan and Japanese languages, a post-conference international symposium entitled Historical Linguistics in the Asia-Pacific Region and the Position of Japanese was held which was attended by many ICHEL 20 participants. Some 150 linguists participated along with about 120 members of the general public. English and Japanese simultaneous translation services were available for those who needed them.

Holding the conference in Japan was a timely factor in bringing to fruition the interest of Japanese linguists that have resulted in the formation of a Japan Society for Historical Linguistics, the holding of the first national conference of Japanese historical linguists (17-18 December 2011), and the establishment of a new journal, Historical Linguistics in Japan.

We warmly acknowledge the following collaborating institutions for this event, the Japan Institute for Sign Language Studies, Tokushima University of Technology, the National Institute for Japanese Language and Linguistics, and the National Institutes for the Humanities for their financial support.

We wish to gratefully acknowledge the support of the members of the Local Organizing Committee of ICHEL 20, who in addition to the undersigned, consisted of the following current and former researchers of the National Museum of Ethnology: Nishio Tatsuo, Shōji Hiroshi, Nagano Yasuhiko, and Yasumi Yohiko. With Emi Iwashita (Kobe Shukugawa Gakuin University) and Naramichi Shizuka (Osaka University), this committee was ably assisted by the outstanding efforts of Matsumoto Ryō, Fujita Akinori, Oomori Yumi, Yoshimura Miiko, Sato Noriko, Takao Naka, and more than 60 students of linguistics and related studies from the Museum and Universities in Osaka, Kyoto, and Kobe, as well as a number of members of the public who assisted as guides and translators.

All workshop proposals and paper abstracts were reviewed by the Scientific Committee for whose heavy burden of work we hereby express our thanks: Peri Brahmasurao (Research Institute for Languages and Cultures in Asia and Africa, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies), Mizuho Ono (Research Institute for Languages and Cultures in Asia and Africa, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies), Kei Nishino (The National Institute for Japanese Language), Kikusa Ritsuko (Department of Cultural Research, National Museum of Ethnology), Matsumori Akiko (Faculty of Humanities, Japan Woman's University), Nakaoka Toshio (Research Institute for Languages and Cultures in Asia and Africa, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies), Robert Ratches (The Graduate School of Global Studies, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies), Satō Tomomi (Graduate School of Letters, University of Hokkaido), Watanabe Honzō (Research Institute for Languages and Cultures in Asia and Africa, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies), Yoshida Yasuhiro (The Graduate School of Letters, Kyoto University), and Yoshida Yutaka (The Graduate School of Letters, Kyoto University).

We would also like to recognize and express our thanks to the members of the International Society for Historical Linguistics who provided us with guidance on the organization and running of the conference. We would be remiss if we failed to thank the various other organizations that provided both financial and other support as participating sponsors of ICHEL 20, foremost among which was the Commemorative Organization for the Japan World Exposition 1970, on whose grounds the hosting Museum is located. Among the other sponsors were The Linguistic Society of Japan; the Organization of Broadcasting for People with Disability; John Benjamins Publishing Company; Brill Academic Publishers; The Mainichi Daily News; Suntory Beverage and Food Ltd.; UCC Coffee Co., Kumotaura Sake Brewing Co., and last but not least, Kenjiro Shizuki (an artist with cerebral palsy) and the staff members of the Toyono Workshop for Persons with Disabilities, who designed the conference logo and produced the very popular conference T-shirts.

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