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: **k**ana   '*kana* script' → hiɾa-**g**ana   'cursive *kana'*
     b. s → z: **su**ʃi   'sushi'   → maki-**z**uʃi   '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: **h**aɾe   'fair weather' → nihoɴ-**b**aɾe   'ideal weather'
     b. ç → b: **ç**ito   'person'   → tabi-**b**ito   'traveler'
     c. ɸ → b: **ɸ**utoɴ 'futon'   → kake-**b**utoɴ   'comforter'

The traditional solution from McCawley (1968) is to assume that *h* and its allophonic variants are underlyingly *p* (thus *paɾe*, *pito*, and *putoɴ* 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:
McCawley, James D. (1968) *The Phonological Component of a Grammar of Japanese*: Mouton, The Hague.

BIO
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