As is undoubtedly the case with many other researchers working on Korean and Japanese with a particular interest in their history and possible relationship, Whitman’s seminal work (1985) on the comparison of these two languages has been a source of inspiration and an example of how one should go about looking for the sound laws that would eventually prove the existence of the (still) hypothetical Koreo-Japonic language family.

Even though his was not the first work on this difficult subject, it still stands out as one which until recently was the most systematic and firmly grounded in the Comparative Method. Indeed, Vovin’s recent monograph on the subject (2010) has benefited from major developments in our understanding of the history of both Koreanic and Japonic, but it still harks back to Whitman’s major endeavour in this area almost thirty years ago as it presents a point-by-point rebuttal of all but six of the 352 etymologies proposed therein (1985: 209–246). Since in the end Vovin (2010: 238–240) comes close to denying the probability of ever being able to prove these two languages to be related, I think one could claim that Whitman (2012) is a major improvement on Whitman (1985) inasmuch as it tries to present a better case for Koreo-Japonic while addressing some of the criticisms in Vovin (2010).

This is hardly the place to review all the etymologies Vovin (2010) rejects and to discuss the well-foundedness of his arguments. Such an enterprise could indeed only be undertaken in a similar monographic format. Neither will I attempt to evaluate the new proposals put forward by Whitman (2012). Instead, I will try to take a fresh look at some of the comparisons and propose a new etymology.

1 Water

Frellesvig and Whitman (2008: 35) reconstruct two central vowels in proto-Japanese (namely *i and *ə) mainly on the basis of two sets of correspondences in which Old Japanese お (usually assumed to reflect pre-OJ *ə) corre-
sponds either to Middle Korean (MK) *u or to MK *o. Still, given that the examples adduced are phonologically extremely similar and the fact that there is at times considerable semantic latitude in their meanings (‘wh[at]’ vs. ‘conjectural adverb’ [=if]; ‘fly’ vs. ‘ride’; ‘eldest, chief (of kin)’ vs. ‘base, origin’), we may be dealing with accidental lookalikes in some cases, and with loanwords in others. Indeed, the fact that MK *koWol(h) ‘county’ :: OJ köpori is one of the items compared strongly supports this latter hypothesis for at least some of them.

So why not consider that this correspondence is one which is only found in loanwords? If we do this, then we would have to conclude that all of the other comparanda, among which ‘fire’, ‘seaweed’, ‘snake’ and ‘boat/prow’, are loanwords, presumably from Koreanic. I think this may well be the case of the words for ‘snake’ and ‘boat’, but the case of the word for ‘fire’ is a little bit more complicated. Vovin (2011) and Pellard (2013) have independently shown that the Japonic word for ‘fire’ was *poy, and consequently the possibility of its being cognate with MK *púl ‘id.’ has been de facto denied.

In defense of this comparison Whitman (2012: 32) rejects the Japonic reconstruction on the ground that the philological evidence for Old Japanese *pó instead of *pö in this particular word is disputable, but in doing this he overlooks the fact that the Japonic reconstruction relies on data from both Eastern Old Japanese and Ryukyuan and therefore rests on firm ground.

Now, the obvious conclusion would be to say that the words for ‘fire’ in Japonic and Koreanic are simply not cognate. İt ürür, kervan yürür (The dogs bark, but the caravan moves on), as the Turkish saying goes. Still, I think that we could approach the vowel mismatch problem from a different perspective. We could say that these words are indeed cognate, and that the correspondence they exhibit—MK *u(l) :: PJ *o(y) with yodization—is one diagnostic of true cognates, in which case the words for ‘fire’ in Japonic and Korean would turn out to be cognate. This has the merit of not being an obvious correspondence, and certainly not one we would expect to find in loanwords.

Another advantage is that we can now tentatively rescue a few more comparisons.

MK *tul- ‘hold, take, lift’ would now correspond regularly to PJ *tőr- ‘id.;’ whereas its correspondence with OJ *tőr- would be of the loanword type, thus incidentally waiving aside Vovin’s (2010: 122) qualms about this comparison.

The same would be true of MK *mul ‘water’ :: OJ *mî ‘id’, even if here the story is a bit more complex. Indeed, by applying the correspondence MK *u(l) :: PJ *o(y), we would expect MK *mul to correspond to PJ *mo(y) (> OJ *mî), whereas the current reconstruction is PJ *me (> OJ mî). This could actually be accounted for if we assume that *me is actually an ablaut variant of *mo(y)