

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-36918-3 - The Languages of Japan
Masayoshi Shibatani
Excerpt
[More information](#)

PART 1

The Ainu language

1

Introduction

1.1 People and distribution

The “Ainu” are a people living on the northern Japanese island of Hokkaidō whose ancestors were both physically and culturally distinct from the Japanese. The pre-historical distribution of the Ainu people is not easily ascertainable, but many place names in the northern part of the main Japanese island of Honshū indicate that they might have once lived in that region as well. Ainu place names are also found in the southern part of the Kamchatka peninsula; and a report by Russian explorers in the early eighteenth century notes the presence of the Kamchatka-Kurile, who were believed to be a distinct group of people formed by intermarriage between Kamchadal and Kurile Ainu.

Although more recent history indicates that the Ainu lived on the Kurile Islands and Sakhalin, Hokkaidō has nevertheless been the main area of the Ainu habitation. The Kurile Ainu, moved to Shikotan in 1884, were only forty-one in number in 1933, and it is believed that there are no longer any direct descendants of the Kurile Ainu still living. In the 1940 census, the Hokkaidō Ainu numbered 16,170, and the 1935 census reported the population of the Sakhalin Ainu to be 1,512. After World War II, some of the Ainu of Sakhalin were relocated to Hokkaidō. In recent years, as a reflection of the Japanese government policy of advocating assimilation of the Ainu into Japanese society, the Ainu have not been considered as a distinct group for census purposes; accordingly, there are no available figures for the contemporary Ainu population. It is estimated to be around 16,000, but as a result of intermarriage between Ainu and Japanese, pure-blood Ainu are said to number less than 1 percent of that figure.

In the Ainu language, the word *aynu* means ‘person’. While the historical distribution of Ainu throughout Hokkaidō is amply demonstrated by the large number of place names that derive from the Ainu language, the language itself is on the brink of extinction. Though ethnically minded Ainu may dispute Hattori’s assessment that the Ainu language “has reached the point of complete extinction” (1967: 58), it is true that Ainu is no longer used as a means of daily communication and that

4 *The Ainu language*

it is remembered only partially by a handful of people of advanced age. Despite this regrettable situation, there exist ample data with which to investigate the nature of this remarkable language.

The Ainu vocabulary reflects the Ainu life style of the past, whose economic and social activities were centered largely around hunting, fishing and gathering. Old patterns of settlement show Ainu communities to have been scattered along coastal areas and along rivers toward the inland. It is conjectured from this that fishing and the hunting of sea animals were the primary economic activities of the Ainu in former times (see Map 1, p. 8). Reflecting the settlement patterns, many place names have the endings *-nay* and *-pet* which both have the meaning 'river'. The Ainu's concern with salmon and whales is also obvious from an examination of their lexicon. The different stages in the life cycle of the salmon are finely delineated by numerous words (roughly twenty) referring to the fish. There are also about fifty words referring to harbor seals, and twenty-four words for different types of whales. In addition, there are taboos, taboo words, and rituals referring to fishing.

Among land animals, bears, deer, hares, and badgers were hunted for food. Of these, bears in particular are of central importance in Ainu culture. This is quite clearly evidenced by the fact that the word *kamuy*, which is a generic term for animals, is also used to designate bears, and by the presence of eighty-three distinct words relating to bears. *Kamuy* also means 'god'. Indeed, bears are thought to be mountain gods that bring bear meat to the village. Dogs were also apparently quite significant in Ainu culture, there being forty-four words for them. It is said among other things that dogs were sometimes trained to catch salmon.

1.2 Literature

The Ainu language has not developed a writing system, but it does have a rich tradition of oral literature. In addition to various kinds of songs, e.g. love songs, boating songs, Ainu has both verse and prose types of oral literature. The verse forms are generally called *yukar* in Ainu and *yūkara* in the Japanese tradition of Ainu scholarship. *Yukar* are recited epics that relate the experiences of gods who manifest themselves by assuming various forms of animals, plants, and natural phenomena, or the experiences of love and war by heroes. In a strict sense the term *yukar* refers only to the heroic verse, mythic epics being more specifically referred to as *kamuy yukar*, *mat yukar*, or *oyna*. There are as well prose-style old stories and folktales.

The language of *yukar* differs significantly from the spoken language. The former, called Classical Ainu in this study, is more conservative and has less dialectal variation as compared with the colloquial language. The two types of language show differences in both syntax and vocabulary, although there is a great

deal of overlap. The most salient difference between them is that Classical Ainu tends to be more strongly polysynthetic than its colloquial counterpart.

1.3 Linguistic affiliation and dialects

In terms of genetic classification, Ainu is best described as a language-isolate. Although various suggestions have been made relating Ainu to such language families as Paleo-Asiatic, Ural-Altaic, and Malayo-Polynesian, or to individual languages such as Gilyak, Eskimo, and Japanese, none of them have progressed beyond the level of speculation.

Among Ainu specialists, John Batchelor (1845–1944), sometimes referred to as the father of Ainu studies, is unique in suggesting the “Aryan connection”. In his pioneering work on the Ainu language, *An Ainu–English–Japanese Dictionary*, published first in 1889, Batchelor sets up a section entitled “Ainu and the Aryan connection”, in which he compares a number of Ainu words with Welsh, Cornish, and a few other languages. He then concludes the section by saying: “This chief argument, however, for an Aryan origin of the Ainu language will be found to lie in the Grammar rather than in vocabulary” (p. 25). But, in the grammar section of the dictionary, no extensive discussion of this issue appears.

From their geographic proximity, Ainu and Japanese are likely candidates for a linguistic grouping. Batchelor, for example, suggests in his dictionary that an analysis of certain words indicates a “very close connection between some parts of ancient, and now obsolete, Japanese and present Ainu speech” (p. 16). However, the relating of Ainu to Japanese was a hypothesis rejected by Basil Hall Chamberlain (1850–1935), whose primary interest was in Japanese and in comparative studies of Japanese and other Oriental languages. In “The language, mythology, and geographical nomenclature of Japan viewed in the light of Aino studies” (1887), Chamberlain pointed out fifteen reasons for his conclusion that Ainu is related to neither Japanese nor any of the Altaic languages, and that it must be considered a language-isolate. Chamberlain’s points were reviewed and reinterpreted in a new light by one of his successors, Kindaichi Kyōsuke (1882–1971), perhaps the foremost Ainu specialist in the world. Comparison of the two languages indeed reveals that the Ainu language, despite its geographical proximity, has a linguistic structure quite distinct from that of Japanese. To summarize some of the features, including those discussed by Chamberlain (1887) and Kindaichi (1937) in their arguments for considering Ainu and Japanese to be unrelated:

- (a) Ainu makes extensive use of personal affixes (section 3.3).
- (b) Ainu, especially Classical Ainu, exhibits phenomena which characterize it as a polysynthetic language (sections 3.5.3 and 3.5.7).

6 *The Ainu language*

- (c) There are no verbal inflections.
- (d) There are verbal suffixes as well as suppletive verbal forms for the plural subject and the plural object (section 3.5.4).

Certainly these features are foreign to Japanese.

Hattori (1959, 1964), on the basis of the glottochronological data and the similarities in word order and the related phenomena summarized in section 3.2, maintains the possibility of an affinity between Ainu and Japanese. However, recent studies in syntactic typology (e.g. Greenberg 1963) indicate that these features are universal characteristics of the languages with SOV word order, and have no direct bearing on the question of genetic classification. Indeed, the characteristics summarized in section 3.2 are shared not only by Ainu, Japanese, and Korean but also even by an Indo-European language such as Sinhalese which is also an SOV language.

Hattori (1964), after completing an Ainu dialect dictionary (see below), remarks that his dictionary provides “good material for the comparative study of Ainu with other languages” (p. 40). He then illustrates one such possibility in terms of the Ainu root *kur*:

Ainu:	\sqrt{kur} :	<i>kur</i>	‘shadow’, etc.
Japanese:	\sqrt{kur} :	<i>kurasi</i>	‘dark’, etc.
Korean:	<i>kurum</i>	‘cloud’	<i>kurim</i> ‘soot’, etc.
Tungusic:	<i>kurun yuk</i>	‘soot’, etc.	
Mongol:	? <i>kara</i>	‘black’	
Turkic:	<i>kurim</i>	‘soot’	
Hungarian:	<i>korom</i>	‘soot’	

Hattori then comments that: “Inasmuch as all of these resemblances cannot be viewed as accidental, we have to assume some historical factors, perhaps even a genetic relationship, to account for the resemblance of Ainu to the other languages” (p. 40).

Hattori’s lexicostatistical work (1959) suggests to him that even if Japanese and Korean were related, the time of split would be more than 4,000 years ago. In the case of Ainu, his view is that, even if Ainu is related to Japanese, the relationship is a fairly indirect one. First, Japanese and Korean are related – if related at all. Then, these are perhaps related to Altaic languages. If Ainu is related to Japanese at all, it is only at this level (p. 236). Schematically represented, Hattori’s conception is as shown in Figure 1.1 below.

Hattori, in other words, is speculating that the Ainu–Japanese split took place roughly 10,000 years ago (p. 235). Considering the time span of 1,500 years for the

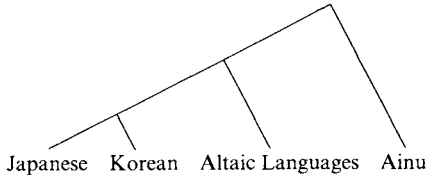


Figure 1.1 The relationship of Japanese to Ainu according to Hattori

split of Romance languages, the Ainu–Japanese connection, if it ever existed, is far beyond our grasp.

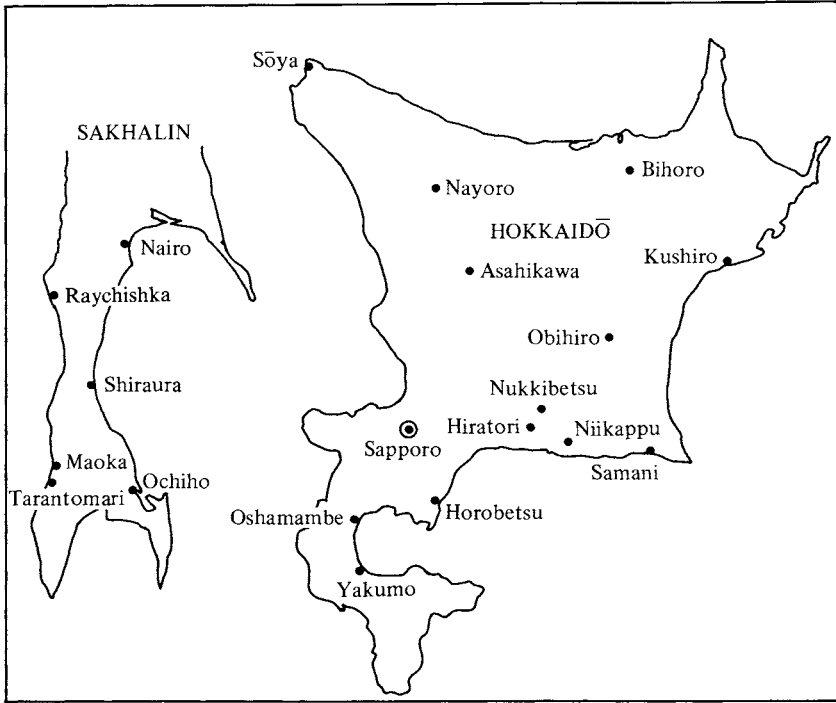
Recently a gallant attempt has been made by James Patrie (1982) to relate Ainu to the Altaic family, and to establish an Ainu–Japanese–Korean subgroup. Patrie, who also gives a good summary of previous attempts in this field, offers 140 Ainu lexical items for his Altaic hypothesis and a total of 221 Ainu lexical items for the above-mentioned subgroup. While Patrie’s work is the only serious and substantial comparative and historical work on Ainu, it has received mixed appraisals from the specialists ranging from encouraging (Miller 1983) to quite unfavorable (Street 1983).

Dialects: Paralleling the original regions of Ainu habitation, three large dialect groups are recognized; namely, the Kurile group, the Sakhalin group, and the Hokkaidō group. Among the Sakhalin group, the eastern coastal dialect of Taraika is said to be markedly different from the speech of the other areas. The Raychishka dialect is a representative west coast dialect and has been studied extensively (see below).

The Hokkaidō group is normally sub-divided into southern and eastern groupings. The differences among the dialects are said to be more phonological and lexical in nature than grammatical. In 1955, Hattori Shirō and Chiri Mashiho and their investigative team set out to investigate the various Ainu dialects of Hokkaidō covering nineteen regions, and including data from the Sakhalin expatriates (see Map 1 below).

In the introduction to the resulting dialect dictionary, Hattori summarizes the relationship among the dialects as follows:

- (i) There is a great gap between the Hokkaidō dialects and those of Sakhalin.
- (ii) Sōya is a Hokkaidō dialect which is relatively distinct from and closer to the Sakhalin dialects than the other dialects of Hokkaidō.
- (iii) Among the Hokkaidō dialects, some are closer to each other, forming sub-groups, than others, e.g. Yakumo and Oshamambe; Nukhibetsu,



Map 1 Ainu dialect map (Adapted from Hattori 1964)

Hiratori and Niikappu; Obihiro, Kushiro and Bihoro; etc. If we choose one from each group and compare them, e.g. Oshamambe, Hiratori, Nayoro and Bihoro, we find that the differences between them are quite substantial.

- (iv) A considerable gap is seen between Samani on the one hand, and Niikappu, Hiratori, Nukkibetsu (and Horobetsu) on the other; and this is of some significance, because there is also a marked difference in other cultural aspects between these districts. It is also to be noted that Samani is lexicostatistically rather close to Obihiro and Kushiro. (paraphrasing Hattori 1964: 38)

1.4 Data

The description of Ainu presented here is largely based on data collected and analyzed by Ainu specialists. The foremost of these specialists is Kindaichi Kyōsuke, whose work has concentrated on the collecting, transcribing, and translating of *yukar* and on writing the grammar thereof. Kindaichi's eight-volume

collection of *yukar*, *Yūkarashū* (1959–64), compiled in collaboration with an Ainu speaker and accomplished *yukar* reciter, Mrs. Kannari Matsu, along with his grammar of Ainu, included in his 1960 volume, together constitute perhaps the most comprehensive and accessible materials to be found on Hokkaidō Ainu.

Chiri Mashihō (1902–61) was a Japanese-monolingual Ainu who, under Kindaichi's tutelage, specialized in the language of his people. Chiri (1936) updated Kindaichi's grammar, and wrote grammatical sketches himself, but his contributions are most strongly felt in the area of Ainu lexicography and the etymological studies of Ainu place names.

Recently, a sizable body of data in the form of recording tapes and text, as well as a grammar of Sakhalin Ainu (Raychishka dialect) have been made available by Murasaki Kyōko (1976, 1977). Murasaki's work was carried out largely with the help of perhaps the last fluent speaker of Sakhalin Ainu, Mrs. Fujiyama Haru (deceased in 1974), and it stands as a great addition to the corpus of data on Ainu languages. An English outline of Murasaki's grammar was published in 1978.

Numerous articles on the Saru dialect have been published by Tamura Suzuko. These articles together cover a substantial portion of the grammar of this dialect, which is a main dialect of the Hidaka area and a direct descendant of Classical Ainu as represented by the version of *yukar* "Itadorimaru", described by Kindaichi, Chiri, and below.

While these materials are written mainly in Japanese, a grammar of the Shizunai dialect has been published in English recently. Kirsten Refsing's *The Ainu Language* (1986) is an important contribution to the meager source of Ainu materials in European languages.

Finally, Batchelor's *An Ainu–English–Japanese Dictionary* (reprinted in 1981), which has a section on the grammar, and Hattori's *Ainugo hōgen jiten* (An Ainu Dialect Dictionary; published in 1964) provide the lexicographical materials.

Among these materials, the following description and analysis most heavily depend on the works of Kindaichi and Chiri. Additional, new materials were sought in the following two sources. The *yukar* "Kutune Shirka", or "Itadorimaru" in Japanese, is one of the principal *yukar*, which Kindaichi transcribed and translated and upon which he based his grammar. The title refers to a magic sword that protects the hero of the epic, which relates various fightings over the golden sea otter caught by the hero. Those examples indicated as (Itadori) at the end of the cited forms are the ones newly culled from the first version in Kindaichi (1931) of the *yukar* "Itadorimaru", which is about 10,000 (Ainu) words long.

Additional colloquial examples come from the book *Ku sukup oruspe* (My Life Story) by Mrs. Sunasawa Kura. Mrs. Sunasawa, an Ainu born in 1897, wrote down memories of her life in her native language, the Ishikari dialect of Ainu, using the

Japanese *kana* syllabary together with Japanese translation. Her materials of roughly 10,000 words were edited as well as transliterated into near-phonemic form by members of the Linguistics Department of Hokkaidō University before being published in book form in 1983.

The Ishikari dialect of the region that spreads between Sapporo and Asahikawa (see Map 1) differs slightly from Kindaichi's and Chiri's colloquial grammars, which, like Tamura's work on the Saru dialect and Refsing's on the Shizunai dialect, are based on the southern dialects centering around the Hidaka region. A brief sketch of the Ishikari dialect is found in Asai (1970).

In the following discussion, the examples from Mrs. Sunasawa's memoirs are indicated by the notation (Ishikari), whereas those followed by the notations (Sakhalin) and (Saru) are borrowed from the work of Murasaki and Tamura, respectively. Those examples without any indications of regions or source are from the grammars of Kindaichi and Chiri. The transcription of the examples, especially of those from Kindaichi's and Chiri's work, have been regularized in near-phonemic form so as to be consistent with the practice of contemporary Ainu specialists.

Many of the theoretically interesting word-formation processes which characterize Ainu as a polysynthetic language occur in Classical Ainu, and our more theoretically oriented discussion makes many references to the language of *yukar*. In this regard this contribution complements Refsing's recent work on the colloquial language of the Shizunai area.

2

Sound structure

Ainu has a relatively simple phonology. In what follows only the most salient features of Ainu phonetics and phonology are presented.

2.1 Vowels

Ainu has five vowels, as shown in Table 2.1 below.

There is no contrast between short and long vowels in Hokkaidō Ainu. Diphthongs such as *ai*, *ui*, *au*, etc. involve devocalization leading to the pronunciation [aj], [uj], [aw], etc. and transcribed as *ay*, *uy*, *aw*, etc. in the cited forms in the text. Syllable initial vowels are preceded by a glottal stop, e.g. *aynu* [ʔajnu] ‘person’, and this fact makes Ainu syllables conform to one of the following types: CV, CVC (for Hokkaidō Ainu), or CV, CVV (long vowel), CVC (for Sakhalin Ainu). The glottal stop is not written in the transliterations below.

2.2 Consonants

The consonantal system is shown in Table 2.2 below.

There is no voicing contrast among the stops. In final position they are unreleased. The combination [ti] does not occur. Since the morpheme final [t] turns to [tʃ] when a suffix beginning in [i] is added, the absence of [ti] can be attributed to the phonetic rule: /t/ → [tʃ] / ___i – a rule observed in Japanese as well. (Cf. the alternation in [mat] ‘wife’ [a-matʃi] ‘my wife’.) The affricate /c/ freely varies among [tʃ], [ts], [dʒ], and [dz]. The fricative /s/ is realized either as [s] or [ʃ]; the [ʃ] sound occurs consistently before [i], and in syllable-final position.

The semivowels /w/ and /y/ occur with all vowels except for [u] and [i], respectively; i.e. the sequences [wu] and [ji] do not occur.

The alveolar nasal [n] may optionally velarize and become [ŋ] before [k]. The flap [r] devoices after [k] and [p], while after [t] it not only devoices but also exhibits slight frication, and after [ʃ], it is devoiced and completely fricated.

All consonants occur in syllable-initial position. In syllable-final position, all except /c/, /h/, and /ʔ/ may occur. In Sakhalin Ainu syllable final stops (/p/, /t/,