

HISTORY OF THE ORIGIN OF THE JAPANESE LANGUAGE

Usmonkulova Yulduz Islomovna

SamDCHTI Faculty of Oriental Languages

Department of philology and language teaching (Japanese language)

1st stage 2415 group students

Abstract. *Japanese is the main language of the Japanese language family spoken by the Japanese people. It has about 123 million speakers and is adopted as the national language, mainly in Japan.*

Recent decades of research show that the Japanese language belongs to the Altaic language family. This language is widely spoken mainly in Japan, as well as in several countries of Asia, America and Europe (USA, Canada, Brazil, etc.), as well as in Australia. Japanese is mainly divided into northern, eastern, western and southern dialect groups.

A few Japanese words are recorded in Chinese sources from the 3rd century, and Japanese texts begin to appear by the 8th century.

Key words: *language history, Japanese writing, book speech, oral speech, Japanese language.*

Japanese is part of the Japonic language family, consisting of Japanese, the Ryūkyū 琉球 languages (Amami 奄美, Okinawa 沖縄, Miyako 宮古, Yaeyama 八重山, Yonaguni 与那国), and possibly Hachijō 八丈.² This article deals with the origins of the Japonic language family³ and the spread of Japonic to the Japanese archipelago. In this article, I use “Japonic” to refer to historical stages of the languages that are directly related to modern Japanese. The term “Japonic languages” also includes Ryūkyūan and language fragments from the Korean Peninsula⁴ that are thought to belong to the same language family as Japanese [1;213-b].

In the past, scholars have compiled extensive word lists to compare the Japanese language with languages of the Korean Peninsula as well as with language families from the south, like Austronesian and Tai-Kadai (Martin 1966; Kawamoto 1977; Whitman 1985; Benedict 1990; Starostin Dybo and Mudrak 2003; Robbeets 2005). Other attempts have connected Japanese to other geographical regions through myth, belief, and religion. This has led to a multitude of competing theories on the origins of the Japanese language. I believe that only a theory that incorporates all available data from different disciplines is suitable for successfully dealing with such a complex question. I will therefore consider data from several areas, such as genealogy, archaeology,



mythology, cultural anthropology, and historical written sources. This will provide a basic understanding of different data from various fields, which should then be reconciled to generate a more coherent picture of the prehistory and origins of the Japanese languages. More specifically, I try to answer the question of the earliest traceable geographical origin of the ethnic group that spoke Japonic and what route these people took to the Japanese archipelago [1;213-b].

The origins of the Japanese language have been debated among generations of scholars, but despite extensive research, no satisfying answer has yet been found (see sections Southern connections and Northern connections). In this section, I will give an overview and examine the main theories developed and discussed in the last decades. It is believed that the Japanese islands have experienced two major immigration waves, the first of which occurred during the Jōmon 縄文 period (ca. 15,000–300 BCE), followed by a second major immigration wave during the Yayoi 弥生 period (ca. 300 BCE–300 CE). This is known as the “dual structure hypothesis” which was formulated by Hanihara Kazurō 埴原和郎 (Hanihara 1991). The Jōmon people were a hunter-gatherer society that occupied the Japanese islands until extensive immigration occurred from the Korean Peninsula, giving rise to the ensuing Yayoi culture that introduced wet rice agriculture, iron tools, and other technologies during the first millennium BCE [2;287-300b].

The most prominent theory that assumes the original area of Japonic is to the south of the Japanese archipelago is the Austronesian hypothesis. A possible language relationship between Japanese and Austronesian was first mentioned by Shinmura Izuru 新村出 in 1911 and Soviet linguist E. D. Polivanov in 1924 (cited in Hudson 1999: 267). The theory of a relationship with the Austronesian languages received attention after the publication of Japanese linguist Ōno Susumu 大野晋 in 1957. According to Ōno, an Austronesian language was present in the Japanese archipelago before the language of the Yayoi immigrants came to the Japanese islands. The Austronesian language remained as a substratum in the newly formed language (Ōno 1970: 70). Following Ōno’s publication, Kawamoto Takao 川本崇雄 (1977) developed an extensive word list consisting of a total of 721 possible Japanese and Austronesian cognate pairs. In 1990, Paul K. Benedict published a monograph relating Japanese to the Austro-Tai language branch, but did not fully agree with Kawamoto, stating that Kawamoto records “‘look-alikes’ rather than cognate sets” [3].



He instead proposed an “Austro-Japanese” language family consisting of Austronesian and Japanese-Ryūkyūan as part of his Austro-Tai macro family. Robert Blust, a historical linguist specialising in Austronesian languages, opposed a connection between Austronesian and Japanese and pointed out that “virtually every etymology is problematic in one or more ways” in Kawamoto’s work [4; 704-b].

Based on archaeological research, a connection between the Austronesian speakers and the Japanese islands seems to be confined solely to the southernmost Ryūkyū Islands of Yaeyama, Yonaguni and Miyako. Summerhayes and Anderson (2009) as well as Mark Hudson (2012) have shown that the gap of roughly 300 kilometres between these southern Ryūkyū Islands and Okinawa was probably never bridged in prehistorical times; cultural Austronesian influence is restricted to the Sakishima islands in the very south of the Ryūkyū Island chain. Hudson claims that “[t]he Sakishima islands of the southern Ryukyus were settled around 4300 years ago by a quite different group of people(s) who seem to have come not from Japan, but from somewhere in Taiwan and/or Southeast Asia.” He proceeds that “the archaeological record offers no evidence for the movement of people or artefacts across the gap between Okinawa and Miyako Islands, and it is widely assumed that this marks the boundary between two different cultural zones” (5; 259-b).

Another monumental publication arguing for an Altaic-Japanese connection is that of Russian historical linguist Sergei Starostin (1991). In subsequent years, the connection of Japanese with the Altaic languages was advanced with the publication of the 2003 Etymological Dictionary of the Altaic Languages (Starostin, Dybo, and Mudrak 2003). Martine Robbeets analysed a set of 2055 lexical items and found 359 lexical etymologies that show a “regular phonological fit for the initial consonant, the medial vowel and the medial consonant of the Japanese entry,” which led her to believe that the relationship between Japanese and the Altaic languages is genetic [6; 210-251].

Another important theory was put forward in 2004 by Christopher I. Beckwith who proposes a relationship between Japanese and the language of the historical Koguryō kingdom (trad. 37 BCE–668 CE) in the north of the Korean Peninsula. His research is based on toponyms recorded in *Samguk sagi* 三國史記, the first Korean historical source from the twelfth century CE. Many lexemes reconstructed from these toponyms have been connected to Japonic. Therefore, this corpus constitutes an important historical source on the Japonic language family.



The toponyms from the geographical sections of the Samguk sagi (volumes 35 and 37) correspond with three provinces of the southern Koguryō territory that were conquered by Silla 新羅 in central Korea [7; 50-b].

Those place names were often directly translated into the Silla language and thus it is possible to reconstruct lexical items of its underlying language. Christopher Beckwith has analysed these lexical items and concluded that they represent a language similar to Japonic. He was able to record “[a]bout 130 clearly identifiable words and function morphemes from the area of the former Koguryo kingdom” from the eighth century CE, in addition to fourteen lexemes from the third century CE [7; 236–237-b].

The earliest archaeological finds of rice in the Japanese archipelago are thought to be dry-field rice and did not have any significant sociocultural impact on the Jōmon populations. It was not until the introduction of irrigation technology from the Korean Peninsula at the start of the Yayoi period that profound changes in lifestyle set in [8; 209-226-b].

The existence of paddy fields and wet rice agriculture is one of the best indicators for determining the start of the Yayoi period. Excavations at the Itazuke 板付 site (Fukuoka 福岡) have revealed paddy fields, irrigation channels, water reservation ponds, and carbonised rice which suggest that rice cultivation was already present in northern Kyūshū around 935–915 BCE [9; 415–416-b].

CONCLUSION

After Japonic and wet rice agriculture were introduced to Japan, historical sources on Japanese mythology show a dual structure: a northern line that is usually associated with a monarchical culture of ancient Korean kingdoms came to Japan in the fourth or fifth century CE. The southern line myths are older and can be associated with the Hayato people of southern Kyūshū. Research on the DNA of the Hayato has shown that they were likely Yayoi people and therefore they may have been the earliest known speakers of Japonic that lived on the Japanese archipelago.

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