

# THE LANGUAGE AFFILIATION BETWEEN JAPANESE AND ASEAN LANGUAGES AND BEYOND\*

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## Abstract

*This paper examines the hypothetical links between the languages of Japan and the languages of ASEAN countries and beyond. The common belief is that the Japanese languages are excluded from the ASEAN languages, but this paper attempts to hypothesize that the Ainu language of Japan belongs to the Austronesian stocks. Therefore several hypotheses are proposed to account for the possible links between the Ainu and the Japanese language and the languages of ASEAN countries and beyond. Basically there are two routes in which the languages of Japan received the influence in the early stage of developments. There is the northern route, which originates from the Altaic source and the southern route, from the Southeast Asian languages mainly the Austronesian language family. It is concluded that the languages of Japan received the influence from both the northern and southern routes plus some other countries.*

*Key words: Austronesian, Ainu, and Altaic languages.*

## Introduction

This paper addresses the affiliation of the Japanese languages with the languages spoken in ASEAN countries and beyond. Viewed from the modern perspective, Japan is a nation with one national language, which is the seemingly homogeneous Japanese language, including the minor indigenous language that has been integrated into the Japanese language called the Ainu language spoken mainly in the northern tip of Japan, the region of Hokkaido. Linguistically, the Japanese and the Ainu languages are totally distinct. Therefore it is important to know that to understand the Japanese linguistics properly and comprehensively, it must be seen from different perspectives, synchronically (the present condition) and diachronically (from the historical condition).

To unravel the historical conditions of linguistic developments of Japan we have to practically investigate the conditions of how the Japanese people and their language were formed. By understanding the scenario of the presence or the early settlements of the

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people coming to Japan, then we begin to realize that the Japanese linguistic formation went through a long, slow and complicated and dynamic process, as early as twelve thousand years ago or probably a lot earlier.

The languages which contributed to the formation of the Japanese linguistics are spread out from the east, Papuan language languages, South and South East Asia languages, the Austronesian languages and further south, the Tamil language and the west, Altaic and European languages.

Thus Japanese linguistics is very complex due to the compositions of the ethnic groups arriving in Japan in different waves. This is the background of this paper that focuses its attention on the affiliation of Japanese languages with ASEAN languages and beyond due to the fact that the Japanese language is comprised of so many diverse languages in the world. Based on these linguistic features of the Japanese linguistics it can be concluded that the present Japanese linguistics originated from diverse sources. This statement is supported by Shiro Hattori who indicates in his *Studies in Altaic languages* (1993:3) that

*Up to now it has been theorized on various occasions that Japanese is related to Ainu, Aleutian languages, Eskimo, Hyperborean languages, Chinese, Tibetan, Burmese, Austroasiatic languages, Austronesian languages, Persian, Greek, Irish, other Indo-European languages ...*

Concerning the genealogy of Japanese, Hattori writes, similar to the quotation above, in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* in 1974 as follows:

*The genetic relationship of Japanese to other languages has not been linguistically established. It is, however, probably related to Korean and possibly to Altaic languages, which include Manchu-Tungus, Mongolian, and Turkic families; all have similarities in their phonological and grammatical structures. Some lexical (vocabulary) and other resemblances, however, have been pointed out between Japanese and other East Asian languages and language families, e.g., Austronesian (Malayo-Polynesian), Austroasiatic, Tibeto-Burmese, and Ainu.*

The bulk of the discussion presented in this paper is that the Ainu and the Japanese languages which are not only related to the languages spoken in ASEAN countries but also diverse languages spoken in the adjacent countries as far flung as countries like Holland, Germany and England, Portugal, France, Italy, Russia and so on by means of borrowing (Shibatani, 1996: 148-9). It is important to know, however, that the ethnic groups, which formed the present Japanese, are not discussed due to the space available in this paper.

## The Ainu People and Their Language

When I conducted my research in Japan from July through December 1999, I learned that there were only fifteen Ainu still surviving. How they became extinct after almost eighty years since Frank reported it should be the concern of the Japanese Government to investigate. Frank (1924: 36) says that:

*The chief interest of the average casual visitor to Japan's north island is no doubt in the remnants of its primitive people, the 'hairy Ainu'. A cluster of them dwells in the outskirts of Ashigawa; there are scattered Ainu villages along the farther reaches of Hokkaido coast, and here and there in the forested mountains. . . . In theory the Mikado's Government acts the role of altruistic guardian over the scanty twenty thousand of these aborigines which its records claim still survive, in Yezo, island of Karafuto, or Saghalien, still further north. . . .*

*Driven if admittently faulty historical records be accepted as viracious evidence, from their once solid foothold on the main island of Japan to the nooks and crannies of its frigid neighbors during the more than twenty-five centuries since their slant-eyed foes came upon them from the south, the Ainus have lost completely their former rugged power of physical resistance to such aggression.*

That was probably the source of the concern of the Ainu people who began to lose their identity, including the culture and the language. I believe that the Japanese Government has done something to preserve the Ainu culture because it has become the integral part of the Japanese national identity, history and culture.

This research is centered on the origin of the Ainu people who regarded themselves as distinct physically, linguistically and culturally from the rest of the Japanese and whether it is likely that the Ainu people and their language are related, however slim it may be, with the Indonesian/Malay and other ASEAN peoples and languages and even beyond as mentioned in the topic of this paper.

Trying to unravel the origin of the Ainu people is certainly not an easy task because they were suspected initially as the first layer of the Japanese inhabitants and consequently they were regarded as native of the island nation. It stands to reason that it is a good idea to place the Ainu within the perspective of the overall process of the peopling of the Japanese islands because Japan became in the early part of the formation, a melting pot of so many races coming from different directions, especially the continent which is traditionally called the northern route and from the islands of South East Asia, as well as South Asia and further west which is called the southern route. According to Upton Close (1942: 18)

*Each pocket in which immigrants are driven by hunger or fear, or led to by the spirit of adventure might assemble, and where, because they could go no further, they had to diffuse or perish. The situation in both cases has led to a feeling of solidarity and insularity.*

If we investigate the chronological sequences perhaps the group of people who entered Japan as the first wave was from the mainland of China, which I suspect, was via the northern route leading to Hokkaido as early as 50,000 years ago (Thorne and Raymond, 1989: 190). Meanwhile, the second wave of people who migrated from the mainland was about 32,000 years ago, taking an alternative route, known as the southern route, via Taiwan to the islands of Okinawa leading to Kyushu. According to Thorne and Raymond (1989: 190) archeological evidence shows that the people who arrived in Japan 32,000 years ago were similar to those who lived in China. They were hunter-gatherers who were active throughout Japan by about 30,000 years ago.

The edge-ground tools, which were used by the hunter gatherers who lived in Japan about 25,000 years ago were similar to, the stone tools found in Australia from approximately the same timeframe. Thus the peopling of the Pacific began at a surprisingly early period and there is a close link between Japan and Australia archeologically. Further research is needed because in fact up to now the formation of the Japanese people remains a mystery.

Searching for the origin of the Ainu people is a puzzle because there are many discrepancies as to where the actual homeland of the Ainu is. One of the advanced theories by very well known scholars such as Thorne and Raymond (1989:190) says that it was established quite clearly that the Ainu are not only Mongoloid but also closely related to the Japanese. It is quite likely that they are, genetically, the descendants of the first settlers who arrived 50,000 years ago. The hairiness of the Ainu is probably the result of the genetic changes that occurred in a small but relatively isolated group due to the severe cold weather. It is generally believed that the environments would contribute to the physical appearances of human beings, especially in the early part of the evolutions of human beings. With the availability of a scientific and modern technology of genetic testing which is commonly used now in archeology the vague and controversial issue could be resolved eventually in search of the genetic links between people on earth.

Talking about the origin of the Ainu people we are never exhausted of sources of theories. For example, in accounting for the origins of the native Australians, Bellwood (1985:95) says that native Australians, who arrived in the southernmost of the continent Australia, had the Ainu source of which their homeland might be located in China. Based on this Chinese connection, as evidence which occurred 30,000 years ago, as mentioned above, we can gradually see a light in order to establish the availability of a network taking place between the Indonesian, the Ainu and the Chinese. This theory is feasible if China is the homeland of the Ainu who eventually migrated to Japan.

However, the origin of the Ainu is still a mystery and since the presence of the Ainu is a part of the development of the Japanese language, it is important to make a further search of the homeland of the Ainu people. It is a matter of urgency because the Ainu language, according to James Patrie (1982: 1), the speech of the aboriginal people of the northern part of Japanese archipelago is now a dead language. A rough estimate indicates that there are approximately twenty thousand Ainu descendants who still live, but primarily in the northernmost island of Hokkaido. They are completely assimilated, both culturally and linguistically, to Japanese.

Thus the Japanese, due to the need to survive in modern living, has absorbed the Ainu people, their language and their culture. Maintaining their language and their culture would mean that they would be excluded from the Japanese society and that means that pragmatically they will not survive in modern living. In other words the Ainu people, placed in this world in an unfavourable circumstance cannot survive any longer. The serious consequence is that the younger generations of Ainus fail to accomplish fluency in their native language and the logical impact is that, as I said before, the remaining Ainus who are still fluent in their native tongue are only fifteen. The last known speaker of the Ainu dialect in a small island of Kurile died in 1957 (Patrie, 1982: 1). Very soon the Ainu language will be eradicated from the earth, unless the Japanese Government takes a necessary step to revive the Ainu language and preserve the precious national asset by means of language engineering.

The work of James Patrie on the Ainu language is presented in a clear and accurate manner. He concentrates on finding the genetic evidence between the Japanese, Korean and Ainu languages by resorting to Altaic, Mongolian and some other languages outside the two groups such as Austronesian and Indo-European languages. He advances several hypotheses and tests whether these they can be proved true or not.

### Ainu and Japanese

There are some lexical similarities between the Ainu and the Japanese languages. Many of these common items can be readily identified as having a Japanese source and being borrowed into Ainu. On the contrary it is also true to say that some Japanese lexical items referring to various flora and fauna are taken from Ainu, but it is only restricted to northern regions of the Japanese archipelago. Basically, the Ainu and the Japanese languages display many different characteristics that are not common to each other. Based on this vague and not convincing evidence and coupled by the fact the commonalities can be traced to borrowing, it is concluded that the Ainu and the Japanese appear to unrelated languages.

Concerning this hypothesis, Patrie (1982: 4) concludes that both linguistically and non-linguistic evidence up to this point suggests that the Ainu and the Japanese are distinct peoples and that the commonalities between them are attributable to centuries of



contiguity. As the origins of both the Ainu and the Japanese are obscured, however, evidence elucidating the origins of one will surely be of importance for the study of the other. In order to account for the origins of the Ainu there have been some hypotheses advanced by different scholars.

### Indo-European Hypothesis

The Westerners thought that, according to Upton Close (1942:18) the Ainu had white blood because the Ainu have white skin. That was the superficial impression of the early Western explorers and traders in the Far East Asia of the Ainu because of their non-oriental appearance. The Ainu are indeed clearly distinct from the Japanese; perhaps their most apparent attribute is their extreme hirsuteness. Their non-oriental traits, however, were exaggerated and stories reached Europe of blonde, blue-eyed race inhabiting northern Japan. This argument immediately sets the stage for the hypothesis that the Ainu were a Caucasian race. On the basis of this assumption, it was further assumed that their language was Indo-European origin.

It is not only Upton Close who thinks that the Ainu people belong to the Proto-white stock. This view is expressed by Edwin O. Reschauer (1977: 9-11) in his book called *Japan: Past and Present*. He indicates that the Japanese people are basically of Mongoloid origins, but the first inhabitants of the islands seem to have been the ancestors of Modern Ainu, a people probably in part of the proto-white stock; that is a group which split off from the white race at such early time that not all characteristics of the Caucasian type had yet developed. The Ainu may once have inhabited all of Japan, but they possessed a Neolithic culture of the early Mongoloid invaders of Japan. As a result they were gradually pushed eastward and northward through the Japanese chain of islands until they now exist only as fast vanishing people living in primitive settlements in the more remote sections of the northern island of Hokkaido and in smaller islands even farther north. Let us now look at another hypothesis, which is more fascinating due to the complexity and challenge to advance this hypothesis.

### Austronesian Hypothesis

This hypothesis is quite crucial because, as it has been mentioned previously, that there are some scholars who advocate that the Ainu language belongs to the Austronesian stock or even the origin or the homeland of the Austronesian. However, it has been debated that it is not true that Ainu belongs to the Austronesian family. Some other scholars believe that the Ainu language is a member of the Austronesian languages (Brace, Tracer, and Hunt, 1991). Even the homeland of the Austronesian still remains unresolved. According to Patrie (1982: 5), Sternberg (1929) and early writings proposes that the Ainu language is of the southern origin, migrating upward from an Austronesian homeland to the Japanese archipelago. He argues that the Ainu language appears to have no genetic relationship with its present geographic neighbours. Sternberg's primary evidence is anthropological. He cites commonalities in various designs, articles of clothing

and tools and physical appearance between the Ainu and an assortment of the Austronesian tribes. Patrie regards that Sternberg's evidence is highly inconclusive, and many of his commonalities, particularly the designs, can also be found in the works of peoples of other regions of the world.

Based on the argument above Patrie concludes that the theory of Austronesian origin of the Ainu appears to be on an academic ground similar to the Indo-European hypothesis. However, Patrie admits, that this puzzling fact cannot be readily dismissed because some segments of Soviet scholarship appear to have accepted Sternberg's hypothesis highly politically motivated. The island of Karafuto (Sakhalin) as well as Kurile Islands chain has been a hotbed of territorial claims between Russia and Japan since the eighteenth century, with each side claiming these territories as integral parts of their homeland. The Yalta Conference of the Allied Powers in 1945 agreed to the claims, and these territories have been in Soviet possession since the end of the Second World War. The fact that the Ainu are the indigenous to the island of Hokkaido is without dispute and that Hokkaido is an integral part of Japan cannot be disputed.

To maintain that the Ainu migrated via Karafuto would be tantamount to saying that both Hokkaido and Karafuto are essentially one territory. And since Hokkaido is without question Japanese territory, it would follow that Karafuto is likewise. Thus to avoid even the possibility of this rather embarrassing conclusion, some Soviet scholars seized upon the southern hypothesis. Following that argument, it can be inferred that the Ainu are recent settlers in Karafuto. Until, however, firm linguistic evidence is presented to justify the hypothesis of the Austronesian origin, it must be dismissed.

Patrie's objection concerning the support given by the Soviet scholars to the Austronesian is very clearly subjective and it can be removed depending on the availability of linguistic evidence, which can substantiate that the Ainu language, indeed, belongs to the Austronesian family. Thus if there is any linguistic evidence to refuse that the Ainu language belongs to the Austronesian, genetically or otherwise, the Austronesian hypothesis advanced by Patrie can be confirmed. It seems that the relation between the Ainu and the Austronesian language family remains misty.

### Palaeosiberian Hypothesis

Apparently Patrie exploits all available hypotheses to maximize the potential resources to support his arguments in establishing the genetic links between the Ainu and other languages. Therefore he resorts to Palaeosiberian languages since Siberia is geographically close to the Hokkaido. Thus Siberia is a good candidate.

The most commonly accepted hypothesis concerning the affiliation of the Ainu language is to tie it with the Gilyak and Yugakir, languages of neighbouring tribes, into the broad

family of Palaeosiberian. This nomenclature, however, specifies a geographic language grouping in the normal sense of genetic affiliation. Thus such a language isolate as Gilyak and Ainu are grouped together with languages where there is sufficient evidence to hypothesize a genetic relationship.

### Altaic Hypothesis

The Altaic languages, originally spoken in the Altaic mountainous regions, are languages that have very vast influences in this region. It is quite possible that Korean, Japanese and the Ainu languages might set up such a hypothesis proposed above.

The Altaic language family is a broad grouping incorporating the Turkish languages in the extreme west, Mongolian languages in the approximate geographic center, and the Manchu-Tungus grouping in the east. Korean and Japanese have also been hypothesized to be Altaic languages. In fact these hypotheses concerning the affinity of various Altaic languages were proposed as early as the eighteenth century.

It was made possible because of the developments of the Neo-grammarians in Germany in which historical comparative linguistics received a firm foundation, and scholars began to apply the Neo-grammarians' principles to languages in Indonesia, which were pioneered by a well-known German linguist Professor Hans Kaehler. Linking the various Turkish, Mongolian, and Tungusic language families, however, presented far more difficulty than did the situation in Indo-European. There were not readily apparent large bodies of cognate words and paradigms on which to base reconstructions. What seemed to be obvious were typological similarities. The two most striking typological features common to Turkish, Mongolian, and Tungusic are vowel harmony and agglutination. According to Patrie (1982: 7) the principle of genetic affiliation is the evidence of recurring sound correspondence. Thus it can be confirmed that the Ainu language belongs to the Altaic language family. The second conclusion is that the origin of the Ainu language is on the mainland and consequently the hypothesis is confirmed.

### The Japanese Language

We have already witnessed that the Ainu language, one of the Japanese languages, is affiliated with the Altaic language family whose homeland is in the mainland. What about the origin of the Japanese? It has been revealed that the Japanese and the Korean are genetically related, and also with the Mongolian languages. It has also been revealed how historically the Altaic and the Mongolian languages significantly influenced the Japanese and the Korean languages. The influence of the Altaic and the Mongolian languages took place for a long time involving physical contacts in which those languages naturally provided the means of communication. These processes took place probably at the end of the Paleolithic period, which took place around 50,000 years ago and continued through the glacial period, which took place around 20,000 years ago. During this time an intense human dispersal took place: the peopling of America, Asia and the



Pacific regions in the east, and Europe in the west. The islands of Japan were the last terminal where they could not move any further to a more secure place and they had to settle there as their new home. Every group of the people from different areas and different races flocked together to share the lands that are ultimately known as Japan.

Concerning the origins of Japanese language, it can be briefly expressed that the formations of the Japanese language are based on two theories. The first is called the northern route of which the source of influence, similar to the Ainu language, is the Altaic language that formed the Altaic stratum with predominantly the Subject-Object-Verb word order. The second is called the southern route referring the influence of the Japanese language which came from the south, namely the languages known as the Austronesian (Malayo-Polynesian) languages covering the languages spoken in not only South East Asia (ASEAN) but extending to Papua (Shibatani, 1996: 109). So the Austronesian languages formed the substratum of the Japanese language. Shibatani (1996: 106) also mentions that an Austronesian language was once spoken in the Japanese archipelago around 8,000 years ago and there is a possibility that the Dravidian and Papuan language also contributed to the developments of the Japanese language. If that is the case the Japanese language is called a mixed language or a multi-layered language, a concept coined by Ono (Shibatani, 1996: 106). If the Japanese language is a mixed language, we could hypothesize that the speakers of the Japanese language, that is the present Japanese people originated from the intermingling of the races comprised of the Jomon people and their descendants, the Ainus, the Mongolian, the Austronesian, the Yayoi, the Korean, the Chinese with the indigenous inhabitants. Therefore it is a mistake to speak of the present Japanese, mythologically, as the descendants of the 'Jamato race' who came from the continent, invaded Japan and proceeded to expel the original inhabitants (Gerard J. Groot, 1951: 79). Searching for the origins of the Japanese language and the Japanese people are very interesting indeed due to the mysterious complexities.

## Conclusion

Japan has two different languages, Japanese as the major language and the other one is the minor language that is genetically distinct from the Japanese, known as the Ainu language whose native speakers are currently almost extinct. In 1947 it was reported that there were 17,000 native Ainus (Whitehouse, 1983: 9). The Ainus are regarded as the remnants of the Jomon population (12,000 years ago), pushed northwards by the Yayoi farmers and their descendants, the current Japanese. Despite of their being a minority, the Ainu language is interesting because of its puzzling origins and affiliations with the Japanese language and other languages. Various scholars working on the Ainu linguistics have proved this. Patrie concludes that the Ainu language is genetically related to the Altaic language family, Korean and the Japanese language itself. Even Ainu is thought to be related to the Austronesian language family.

The origins of the Japanese language is also difficult to determine due to the fact that the Japanese people is the result of the influx of human movements from the mainland of Asia and other areas during the early peopling of the Pacific islands which took place as early as 50,000 years ago or even much earlier than that. That is the reason that the theory concerning the origins of the Japanese people is very complex. Based on that complexity, however, it can be summed up by hypothesizing that the origins of the Japanese language are of two sources: the northern routes of which the Altaic languages form the stratum of the Japanese language and the southern routes, which constitute the substratum. The substratum is mainly the Austronesian language family that consists of the languages spoken in ASEAN regions. While in fact the Japanese language, including the Ainu language, received the influence not only from the Austronesian languages, including the languages spoken in Indonesia, but also from different far fetched sources such Tamil, Dravidian, Papuan, Mongolian and even as far as European languages. This is the linguistic situation, which gives rise to the topic of the paper that I am now presenting.

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