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Keywords: river names, hydronym, East Asian languages, Japanese, Geolinguistics.

Title;

Distribution of River Names (Hydronym) in Japanese and East Asian Languages and Their Geolinguistic Interpretation

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Abstract;

By investigating the distribution ranges of Hydronym as for river names and watercourses in Japanese, Ainu language, Korean and East Asian languages from a geolinguistic perspective, we can reveal the ancient distribution and the historical sequence of influence from East Asian languages on Japanese Dialects.

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Note: I am afraid that some I.P.A. characters get loss or change during transmission by E-mail or printing for publishing. So please confirm them by my original Japanese thesis if you have some question about each word form.

1 East Asian Languages and the Monsoon Asia Region

1-1. Historic Research on East Asian Languages and the Monsoon Asia Region

Genealogical origins and relations of East Asian languages—including the Japanese language—remains unclear even in the light of latest findings in linguistic research worldwide. Languages of concern in this study, namely, Japanese, Korean, Ainu, and Palaeo-Asiatics all belong to this group of languages with unknown origin.

This gap in research findings can be attributed to several factors. First, compared to their Indo-European counterparts, there remains much less linguistic materials left of these East Asian languages. Another reason is the fact that the only comparative linguistic approaches, which have been valid approaches to study Indo-European languages, have been applied to East Asian languages. The approaches that have been useful for the study of Indo-Europeans may not be equally valid for the study of East Asian languages. Rather, the long and complex history of the East Asian region calls for new approaches to the study of languages spoken within its boundaries.

The present study proposes one such new approach to the historic linguistic research on East Asian languages from the viewpoint of the stratificational model.

Research based on the stratificational model can be defined as a geolinguistic and typological analysis of linguistic features of various languages spoken within a particular region (Mainhof and van Warmelo, 1932). The approach also aims to clarify, as much as possible, differences in chronological age, geographical limits, and factors which contributed to similarities and differences among those languages.

According to Abe (2002. 5), the stratificational approach:

- 1) employs research methods of dialectology and geolinguistics.
- 2) considers all different levels of strata which consist of several different languages with different origin and / or relations.
- 3) describes languages, not only in terms of the absolute time in years, but also in terms of relative historical markings.
- 4) describes the entire linguistic history of the region more concretely—as a complex phenomenon with various linguistic features (e.g., grammar, phonetics or lexicon) by different historic stages.

As illustrated in this paper, this stratificational model of language evolution can help explain typology and distribution patterns of East Asian languages and suggests the possibility that a number of common features were widely distributed throughout the region at a fairly early stage in history.

Of all common features, the most prevalent are the distribution of names for various forms of **Hydronym** (including names of swamps and marshlands, hereafter “Hydronym rivernames”) and that of classifiers throughout the region. Regional similarities found in these two types of distribution seem to indicate common features in Asian languages that date back to early times in history.

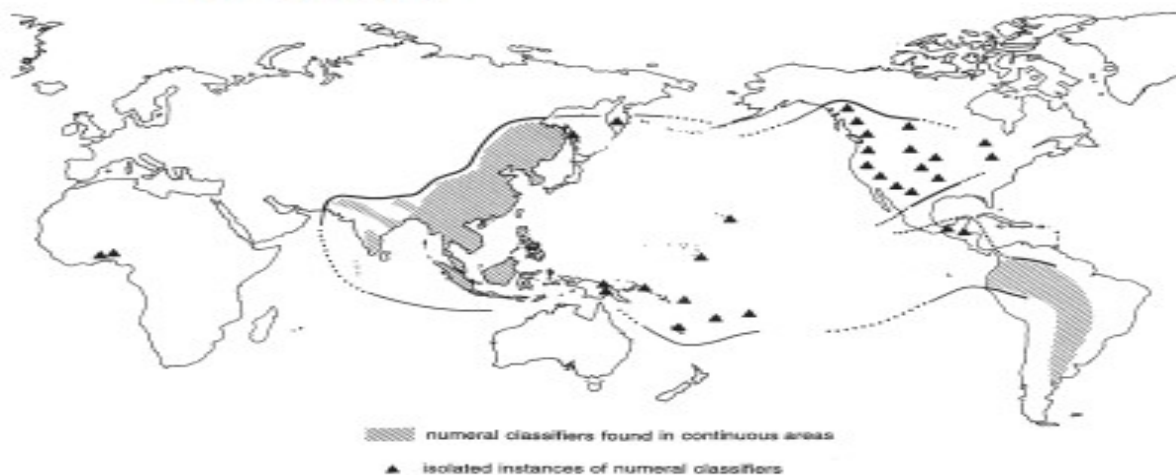
Furthermore, the distribution patterns of these linguistic features throughout the region seem to suggest the existence of the “Monsoon Asia Cultural Sphere” as one of factors contributing to the formation of the linguistic substratum (Abe, 2003.7).

●The “Monsoon Asia Cultural Sphere” as the background for distributions of rivernames, classifiers and myths.

○ Aikhenvald, Alexandra Y. (2000). Classifiers. Oxford University Press.

Map. 1 *Distribution of numeral classifiers in the languages of the world*
Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald (2000)

図1-② 「類別詞」(Aikhenvald2000)の図を太平洋を中心にして改編した図
(安部 (2025) 版)



1-2. Distribution patterns of classifiers

Classifiers are a type of linguistic phenomena widely observed in the Asia-Pacific region (Aikhenvald, 2000, Map 1). It remains unclear why the phenomenon is found in this particular geographical area. Yet it may suggest a possibility that it resulted from a certain linguistic distribution within this region. That is because, as will be discussed in the section that follows, many other types

of shared cultural-anthropological phenomena are found in this area.

● Map 2 : “Monsoon Asia Cultural Sphere” and Altaic Language area. By ABE 2005



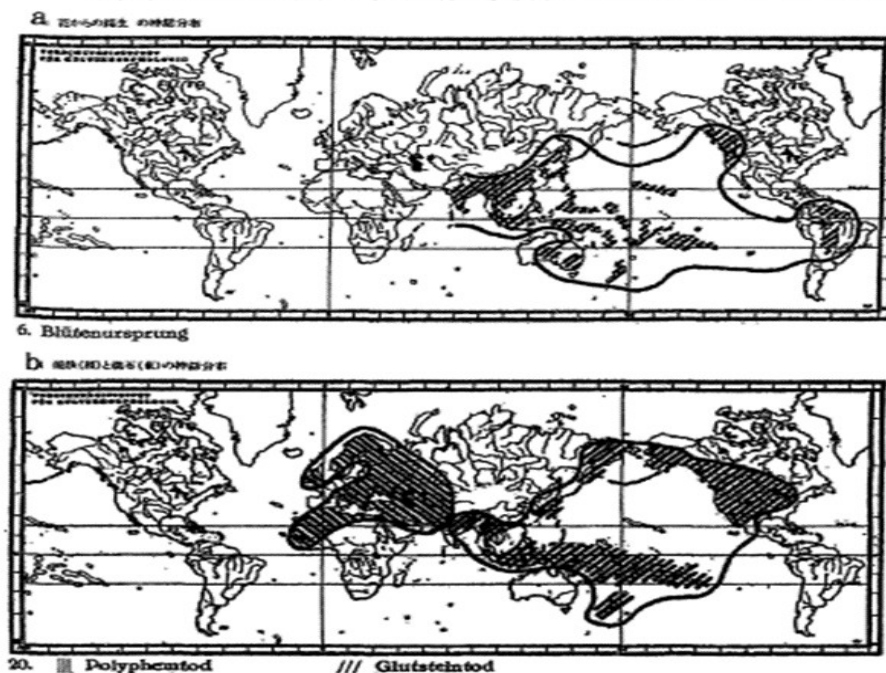
図 2-② Monsoon Asia Cultural Sphere (M.A.C.A.) の概念図 (MA の領域内)

1-3. Distribution Area of Mythology

● Eastern mythology (Frobenius, 1938)

Map G

⑬ Distribution of Typological Mythology by Frobenius 1938.
[東洋における神話の類型的分布領域 全10図 (フロベニウス1938)]



Distribution patterns of mythology play a particularly important role in geolinguistic research as it is transmitted through language. As indicated by Frobenius (1938), unique patterns exist for distribution areas of various myths in Asia. MAP G (a & b) shows two of the ten atlas of mythology distribution in the East by Frobenius (1938). It is remarkable that these areas of distribution closely overlap with that of classifiers presented above. It is intriguing to note that both areas cover South and North-East Asia and reach the Pacific and the Pacific Rim regions.

Of course, these overlapping areas of distributions do not directly prove language similarities.

Yet when the fact that various myths can spread geographically only by means of language, it thus seems to suggest the existence, at a very early stage in history, of a common cultural basis for linguistic diffusion.

2. Rivernames: their forms and distribution patterns in East Asia

2-1. Significance of rivernames in geolinguistics

It has been pointed out that studying rivernames is one of the best approaches to geolinguistic research on a considerably wide geographical area.

According to Krahe (1954), it has been proven that, of all proper names, rivernames are the oldest and boast the longest continuity. Krahe (1954) further argues that rivernames, thanks to their above-mentioned unique characteristics as linguistic material, best help shed light on ancient civilization, and migrations within the European continent.

Further, Schostakowitsch (1926) identifies unique patterns in word-endings of Siberian rivernames and argues that the pattern derive from an ancient language which once was used by a vanished ethnic group who lived in the region.

Based on these studies of European languages, Kim (1983) studies the genealogy of the Korean languages. As a way of illustrating differences among the Kokuryo language of the Northern Korea as well as Southern Korean languages of Pekche and Silla, Kim (1983) reports different rivernames used in these three languages in old Korean Peninsula.

Likewise, Abe (2001.11, 2003.7, 2003.7.29, 2004.7) found that rivernames which supposedly evolved from the same etymons as the rivernames in the Japanese language are widely distributed throughout East Asia. Abe's recent work (2004.7, 2005.5, 2025a & 2025b), including this article, follows the aforementioned studies on European and Siberian rivernames and is the first to identify patterns of rivername distributions all across Asia.

2-2. Distribution patterns of a rivername, “*nahdi”

A common word form is found in rivernames in Japanese, Korean, Tungus, Chinese, Gilyak and Mundari. In addition to these East Asian languages, rivernames in Austro-Asian languages such as Dravidian and Munda in South Asia as well as in Turkish in West Asia share common word form. As such, it can be safely assumed that all of these rivernames evolved from a common etymon, most likely, “*nahdi, “early in history.

○East Asian Languages <*nahdi	
Japanese	na (Old Japanese; cf. ABE 2004. 7)
Japanese	nai (Ryukyuan Dialect ; sonai, pinai)
Japanese	nai (Tohoku Dialect ; nai, sappinai)
Japanese	nati (river name; nati river)
Chinese	nai, nei, ner, ndei (ancient CHN.) = 濘・泥
Korean	nari, naih, nara, *nai, *na (ne : modern Korean) (Middle & Old Korean, and Korean Dialects)
Tungus	Nā
Gilyak	*nalu, nāllu, ḡalu, (ḡayu for a small river , ḡallo for a small bay.[ḡ] means [n] have ‘·’ mark over it.)

【図7】 ナイ（川）の地名分布 鏡味完二（1958）

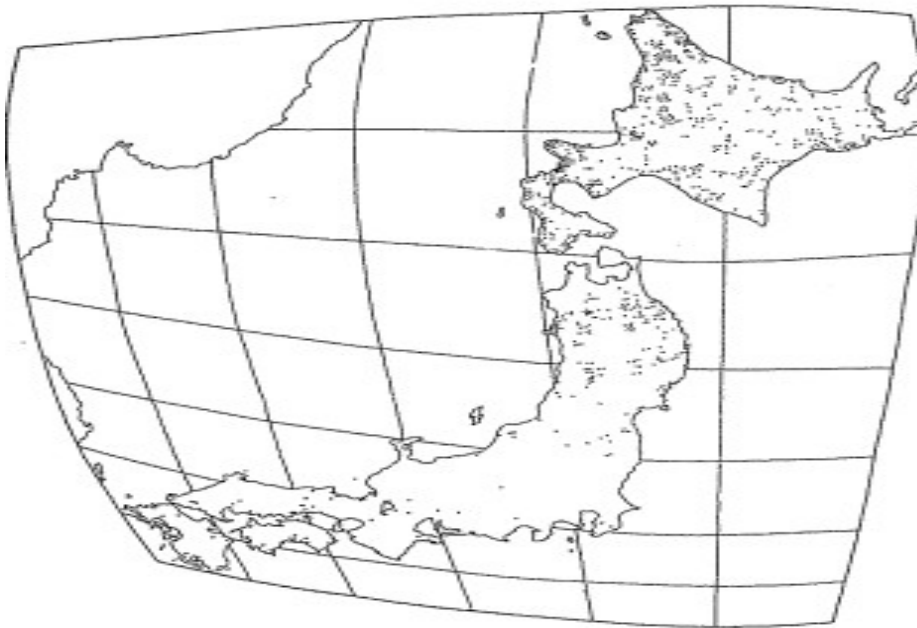


Fig. 204 -nai

視点：北海道の中央。図高：1,000km。
1方眼：250×250km²。

Nai は Ainu 語で
「川」の意。

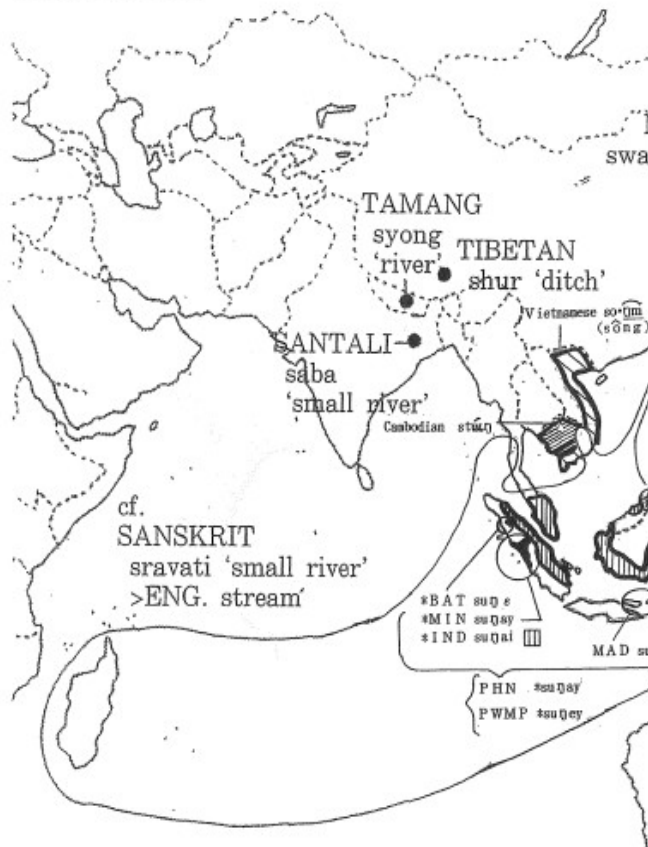
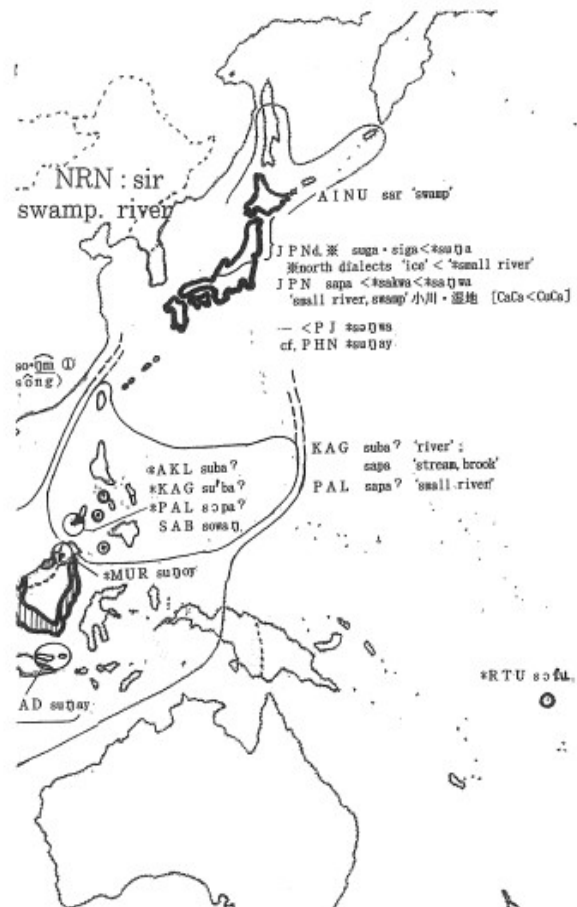
2-3. Distribution patterns of a rivername, “*səŋay

● Distribution patterns of small river, “*səŋay

Distribution of *saŋwa~*suŋay as ‘small river’ 小川 in Monsoon Asia ABE

Seiya (2004.7)

ABE Seiya(2025)



“Sawa” is a Japanese word that stands for a brook or a swamp. In addition, there are several place names in Japan, all of which concern river or water, that are considered as to have derived from the same etymon as “sawa”: Suwa, Singa, Sungoo (<sungau<sungaϕu<sungapu, ng=η). From these derivatives, a common etymon, “*səngwa” (or *sungwa) can be assumed. Proto-Japanese (PJN) “sapa, saba” & “*səngwa (or *sungwa)”

Rivernames in the Ainu, Korean, Austronesian, and Austro-Asian languages that presumably derived from the same etymon as the Japanese words above are as follows (cf. ABE2004.7 & 2004.12).

Ainu	sa (river sides, plain, Batchelor’s Dictionary)
Ainu	sar(*sar·ga<*sanga, swamp, from Slawick)
Ainu	sara (A plain covered with a kind of sedge, Batchelor’s Dictionary)
Korean	sir<*sər (small river in "Sangoku-Iji")
Naanai (Tungus)	siru<*sər (sand)
○Austronesian; rivername	
①*AKL (Aklanon)	suba?
*PAL (Palawan)	səpa?
*KAG (Kagayanen)	súba?
SAB (Bangingi Sama)	sowing
②*MUR (Murut (Timugon))	sungoy
*BAT(Batak Toba)	sungε
*MIN (Minangkabau)	sungay
*IND (Indonesian)	sungai
MAD (Madurese)	sungay
③*RTU (Rotuman) (Polynesian)	səfu
PHN (Proto-Hesperonesian)	sungay
PWMP(Proto-Western-Marayo-Polynesian)	sungey (cf. MGY=MALAGSY MERINA in Tryson 1995)

The Austronesian word form described above is documented in Tryson (1995) also refers to the following word forms and meaning in its appendix.

① AKL	Proto-Southern Philioppines *suba?
PAL	sapa? (small river); səsapa? (stream, brook)
KAG	suba?(river) ; sapa (stream, brook)

Tryson (1995) cites “sungay” as a Hesperonesian etymon and “sungey” as a Proto-Western-Marayo-Polynesian etymon with similar genealogical origins.

In addition, it is highly likely that rivernames in the languages listed below (Tibetan, Vietnamese, Cambodian and Burmese, and Tamang of the Tibeto Burman from the Sina-Tibetan language family) are also related to the “sungay” etymon. Thus, the geological relations between the “sungay” etimon and its possible derivatives in these languages should be examined in future research.

Tamang (=Murmi)	syong (for river), Hunter (1978)
Tibetan	shur (ditch), by Kitamura · Nagano1990
Vietnamese	song [so · ηm ①] (river)
Cambodian	st <u>u</u> η [u =u + ‘] (river)
Burmese	khyong [chauN:] (river)

Furthermore, a “sungay” derivative in Santali (one of the Mundari langugaes which belongs to the Austro-Asian language family) is saba. It can be assumed that this “saba” evolved from the same etymon as did other derivatives in East Asian languages. The examples from those languages are

repeated below.

Santali	saba (small river), by Campbell's English-Santali Dictionary.
	cf. Japanese; sapa, *saba (small river, swamp)
	(cf. *səngway>*savay>sravati (SKT)>stream (English))
PAL(Palawan)	sapa? (small river)
KAG(Kagayanen)	sapa (stream, brook), suba?(river)
	cf. AINU; sar (swamp)

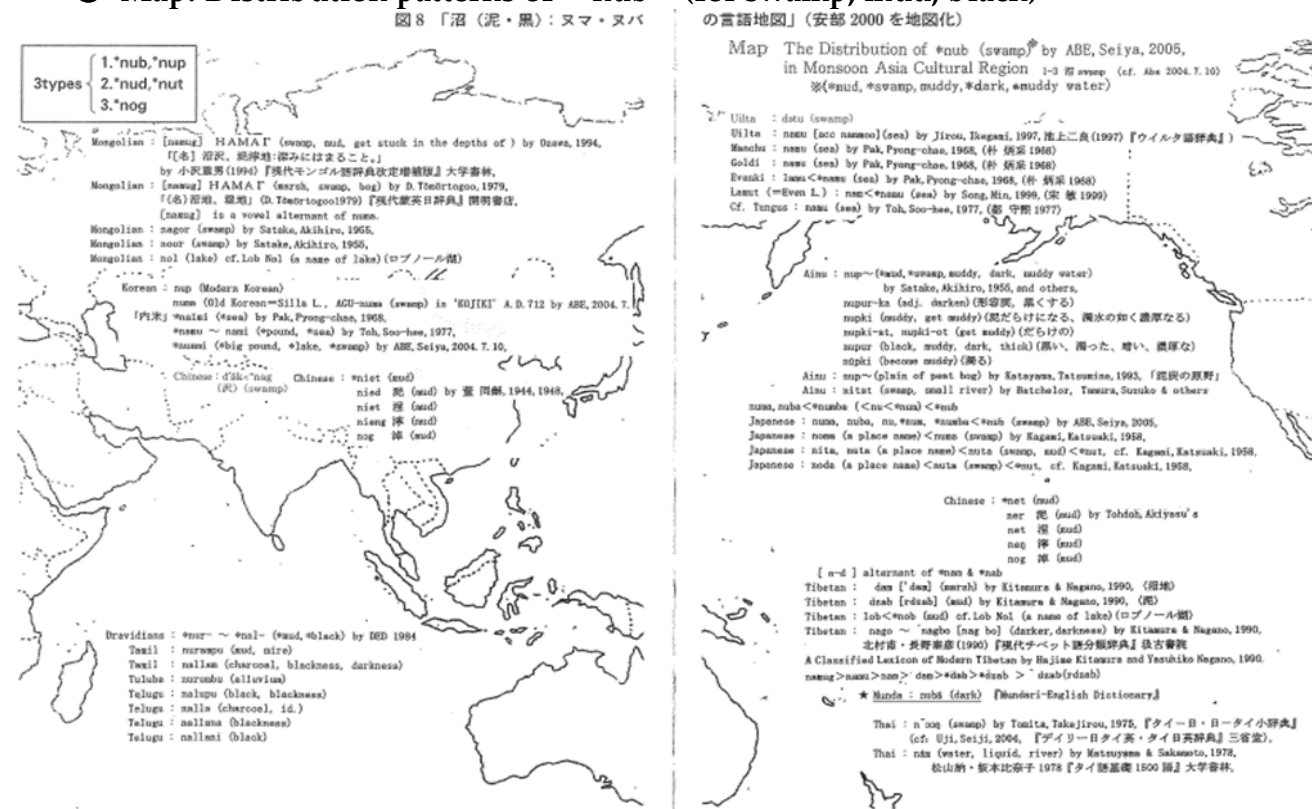
Though these language originate from places far away from one another, all of these derivatives share the vowel, “a (or ə)”. The evolution of rivernames in this particular language group can be assumed as:

*saba<*sagwa < (*sar<*sargwa)<*sangwa <*sangway (or *səngway)

As illustrated below, the “səngay” derivatives are distributed as far as Austro-Asians in India, Austronesians in the Pacific region, and Japanese and Ainu in north eastern Asia. Of these languages, the close relation of Austronesians and Ainu has been pointed out by Murayama (1993).

2-4. Distribution patterns of a rivername, “*nub” (for swamp; cf. Abe, 2005.5)

● Map: Distribution patterns of “*nub” (for swamp, mud, black)



Words that refer to swamps and wetlands are also widely distributed throughout Asia (Abe, 2005.5). For instance, Japanese has three such words, “numa” in modern Japanese, as well as “nu” and “nuba” both of which were in use during the Nara period.

“M” and “b” in those swamp-related words are phonetic allphones and as such, are interchangeable. Given similarities and differences in word forms of these three words, the following process of linguistic evolution can be assumed (Abe, 2005.5).

Japanese	*nub>*numb(>*num>nu),>*numba>nuba/numa, (swamp, mud, dark) (Abe, 2005.5).
Ainu	nup- (*mud, muddy water)
Ainu	nupur-ka (adj. blacken)
Ainu	nupki (wear mud, thick as muddy water)
Ainu	nupki-at, nupki-ot (mud all over)
Ainu	nupur (black, thick, dark), by Satake, 1955.
Ainu	nup-, (peat moor) by Katayama, T. 1993.

In addition, in the Ainu language, there seems to exist “*nup-” a common morpheme for words that refer to “swamp, ” “black” or “muddy water” (Satake, 1955. cf. Abe, 2005.5). There is also another interpretation that “nup” stands for “peat moor” (Katayama, T., 1993). Taken altogether, nup- is used for mud, peat, wetlands, all of which are closely related to swamp.

Ainu; nup- (swamp, mud, wetland, muddy water)

In Korean, nwp stands for “swamp.” “Numa” is also documented as part of a placename—“agu-numa” in Silla, the ancient Korea—in the Japanese “Kojiki.” (Abe, 2005.5).

Korean; nwp, Silla language, 'agu-numa'

In Mongolian, to give yet another example, “namug” exists as a word to refer to marsh, swamp or bog (Tömörtogoo, 1979), . This “namug” can be interpreted as a vowel alternant of “numa” (Abe, 2005.5).

Mongolian ; HAMA Γ [namug], n. marsh, swamp, bog.(D.Tömörtogoo, 1979)

In Tibetan, too, a possible n-d alternant of “numa” exists.

Tibetan: ṽdam (‘dam) for marsh (Kitamura & Nagano, 1990).

Tibetan: ṽdzab (rdzab) for mud (Kitamura & Nagano, 1990).

When seen as n-d alternants of “numa,” the word, “dam” can be taken as “nam,” a form which closely resembles “namug” in Mongoln (Abe, 2005.5).

namug>namu>nam>ṽdam (>*dab) >dzab (rdzab) (cf. *num >dim (dark))

Further research has found words that resemble “nam-” and “dam-” and stand for “sea” (which is closely related to swamp) in Uilta, Manchu, Goldi, Evenki, Lamut, all of which belong to the Tungus language family.

Uilta	namu [acc. nammoo] (sea) (cf. dətu (for swamp))
Manchu	namu (sea) (Pak, 1968)
Goldi	namu (sea) (Pak, 1968)
Evenki	lamu<*namu (sea) (Pak, 1968)
Lamut (=Even);	nam<*namu (sea) (Song, 1999)
	cf. Tungus; namu (sea)(Toh, 1977)

“Namu” and its derivatives in these languages seem to have evolved from the same etymon as did “namug” (swamp) in Mongolian and “dam” (marsh) in Tibetan, given their close resemblance in both word forms and meaning. With these words, the referent “swamp” changed into “ocean” as those language were mainly used in inland areas where there is no ocean and where other forms of big bodies of water such as lakes and swamps must have been understood as “the ocean.” Assuming that, the following continuum of evolution seemed to have existed in the region:

numa ‘swamp, bog’↔namu~ ‘swamp、marsh, bog、mud’ ↔namu ‘sea’

As discussed above, a wide variety of “numa / nuba” derivatives that stand for swamp or ocean exist in East Asia.

Let us now turn to South Asia. Mundari (an Austro-Asian language), has a word, “nuba”

for black, which shares a meaning with (<*nub、 as for swamp, mud, black) “nup” in the Ainu.
Munda ; nuba (dark) “Mundari-English Dictionary”

It is worth noting that Austro-Asian languages such as Mundar has such a cognate word: it seems to suggest the same East-South Asia diffusion pattern as with “nahdi” and “sungay.”

This section reviewed distribution patterns of rivernames, *nahdi, *səŋay, *nub” in Asia and illustrated how cognate words exist in languages used in Northeastern Asia (i.e., Japanese, Korean, Ainu and Tungus) and those spoken in South Asia (i.e., Austronesians, Austro-Asians, Dravidians).

- Figure 1.10: Suffixes in names of lakes and wetlands -ike and numa (From Kagami 1958: 18).

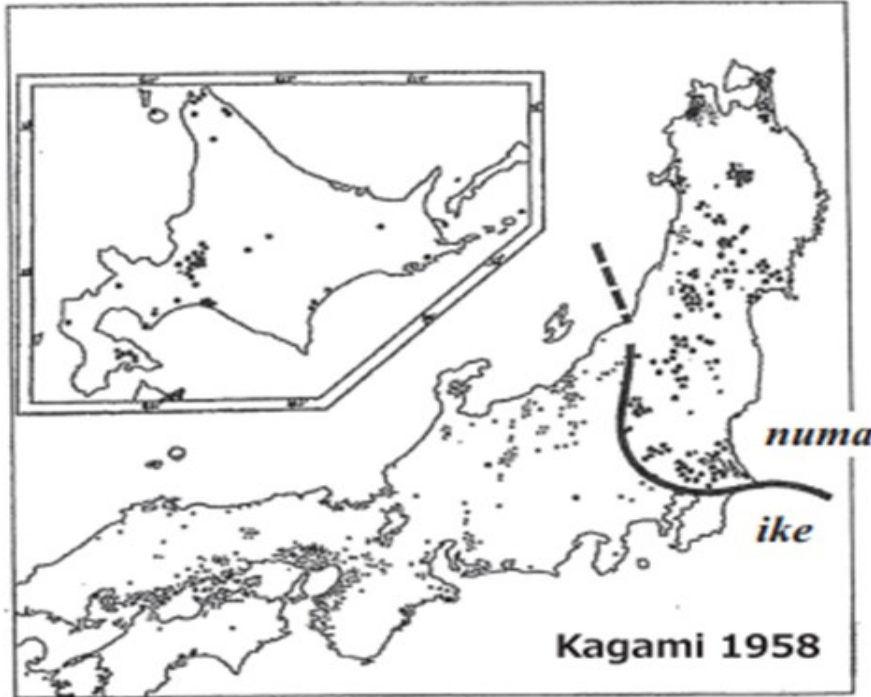


Figure 1.10: Suffixes in names of lakes and wetlands -ike and numa (From Kagami 1958: 18).

- Figure 1.11: River names with the suffix -tani (Original map: Kagami 1958: 14 [From Suzuki 1978: 135]).

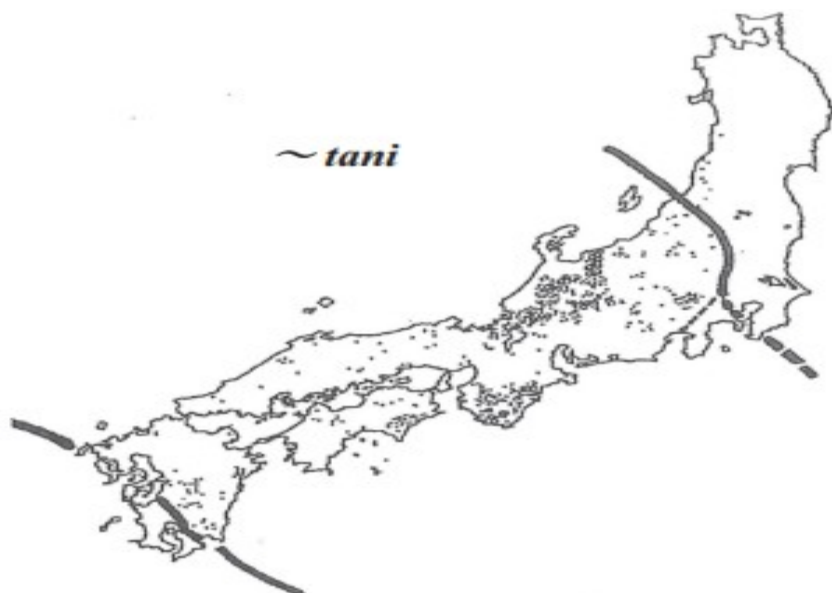


Figure 1.11: River names with the suffix *-tani* (Original map: Kagami 1958:

● Map: Distribution patterns of “*jat~”(left side) and “*sapa, saba” (right side)

【図4】ヤチ・ヤツ・ヤト (谷地、谷津、谷戸) の地名分布 鏡味完二 (1958)

【図3】サワ (沢、さは) の地名分布 鏡味完二 (1958)



Fig. 515 Yati • Yatu • Yato

黒点: Yati (谷地),
 黒点: Yatu (谷津),
 小黒点: Yato (谷戸) (1個),
 大黒点: Yato (10個).

「遺地」の地名.

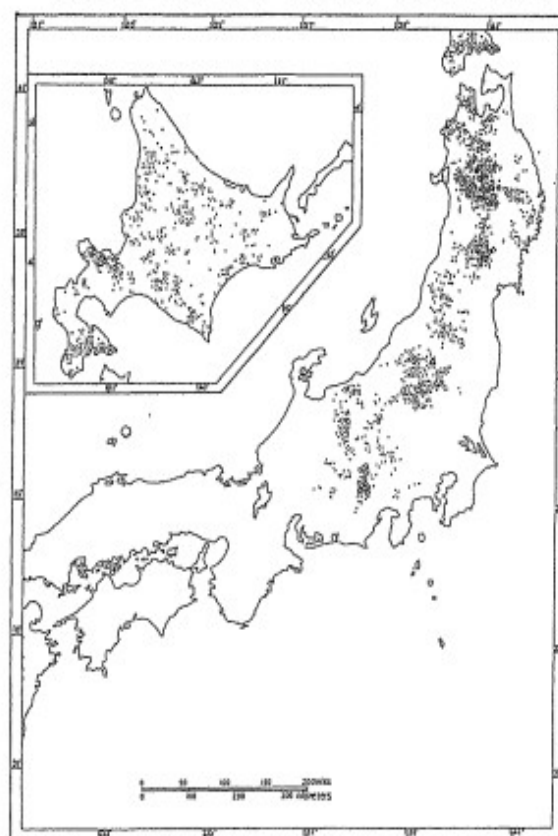


Fig. 13 河川名の語尾: ~沢

小点: 1個, 黒点: 10個. 著るしい東北日本型分布, 九州に分布なし.

■ FROM ABE 2006

5.4 Isogloss bands between “gai-rin” and “nai-rin and chū-rin”

5.4.1 Peripheral distribution of dialectal forms (“ABA pattern”)

Another isogloss band, Isogloss Band II, is shown in Figure 1.7 and Table 1.2. Bands dividing Japan into a central region B (Southern Kantō, Tōkai, Chūbu, Kinki, Shikoku, Chūgoku, northeastern Kyūshū) and the periphery area A surrounding it (north of the Tone River and south from southwest Kyūshū, including Okinawa) form a peripheral distribution of dialect forms (an ABA distribution), in which the central area B is surrounded by the peripheral areas A. The location of these boundaries coincides with the

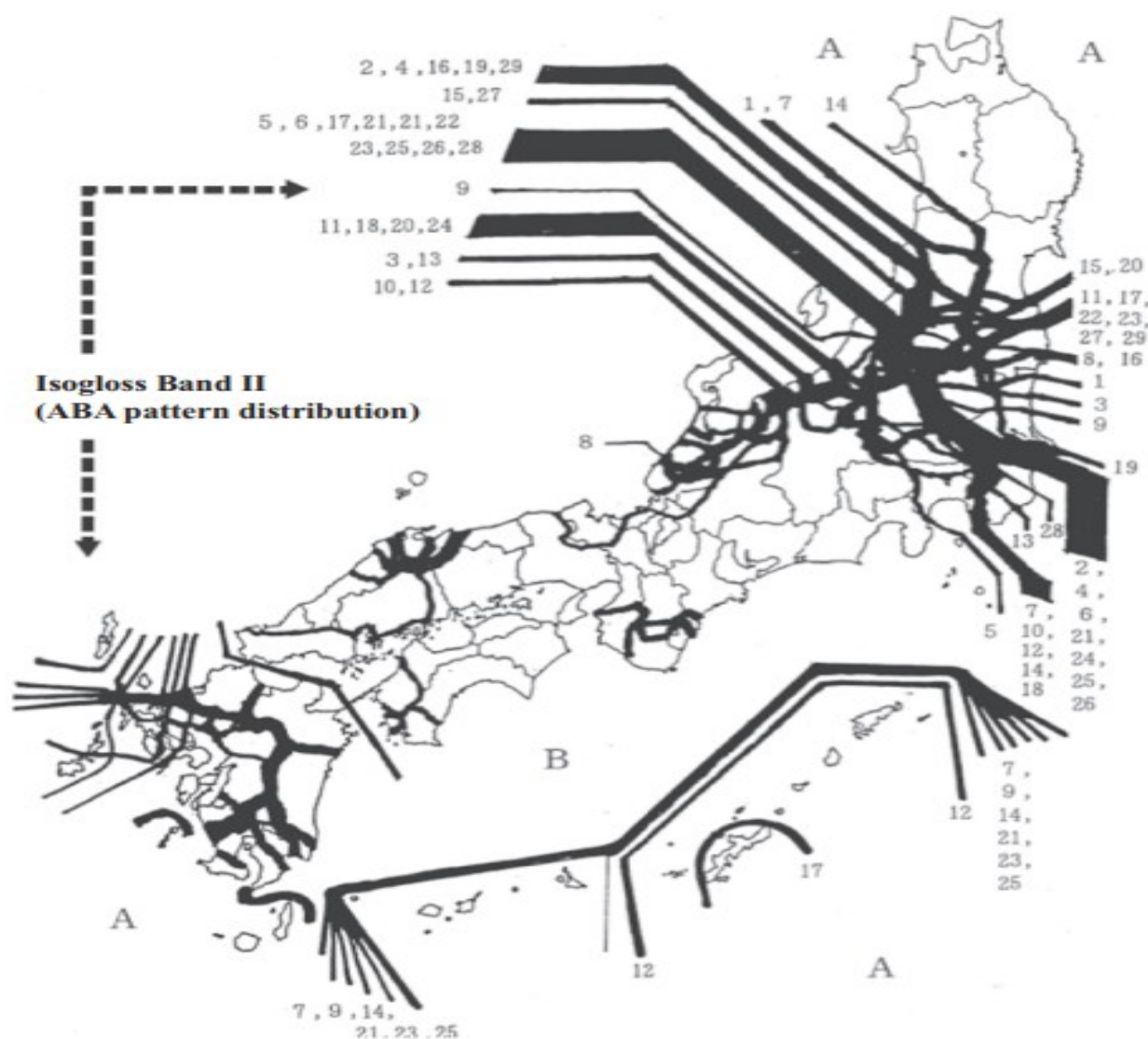
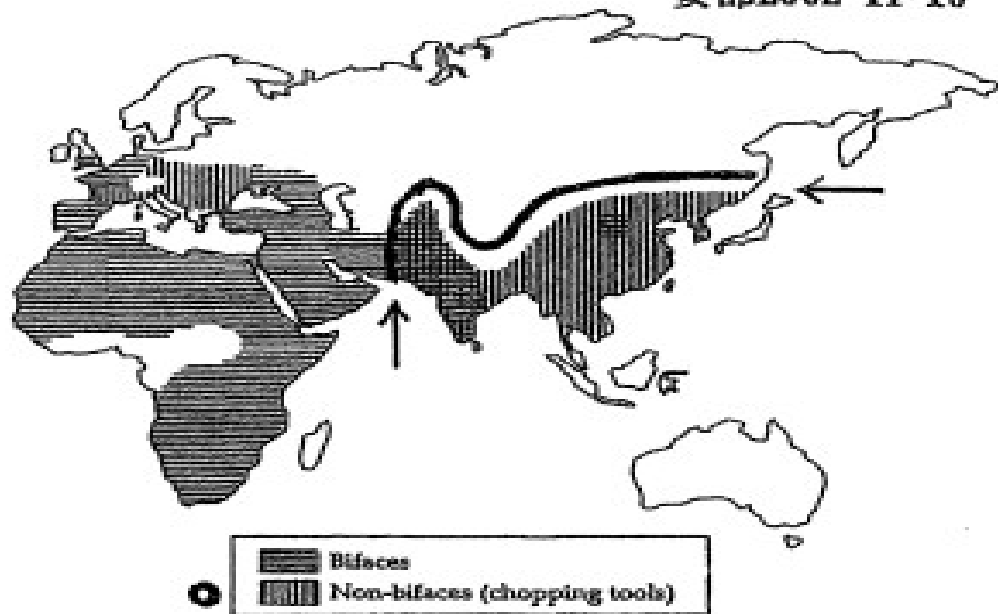


Figure 1.7: ABA (gai-rin versus chū-rin and nai-rin) boundary lines (from Abe 2008: 156, *Shirizu hōgengaku* 1: *Hōgen no Keisei*, Iwanami).

● Map D: CHOPPING TOOLS IN PALEOLITHIC ERA (EAST : NON-BI-FACES)

Map D ④ Distribution of Chopping Tools in Paleolithic era
 旧石器時代のchopping tools 打製石器群分布
 by R. Lewin 2002,
 安部2002-11-10



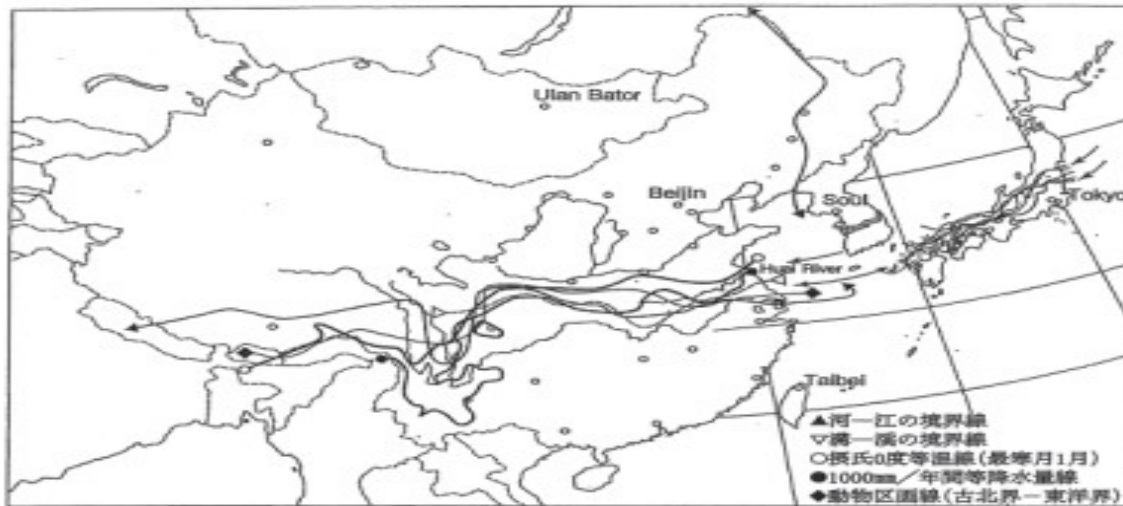
■ FROM ABE 2006

5.5.2 Characteristics in common between the north-south dialect isogloss band and the Asian north-south dialect isogloss band

The north-south dialect isogloss band can be considered a dialect boundary formed by the influence of climate and natural phenomena on human life, which created regional differences in communities. The same can be identified in mainland China, which shows a western extension of the north-south dialect isogloss band.

As shown in Figure 1.13 above, the positions of the north-south boundary between the Chinese words for 'river', *he* (河) and *jiang* (江), the north-south boundary between words for 'mountain stream', *xi* (*chi*) (溪) and *gou* (*kou*) (溝), the isothermal line at 0 degrees Celsius (coldest month: January), the location of the isohyetal line at 1000 mm per year, and the boundary of the faunal realms (palaeartic realm—oriental realm) are almost coincident. In both Japanese and Chinese, we can see that the boundaries of dialects, differences in climatic conditions, and the north-south boundaries of cultural phenomena are on a contiguous line connecting east and west. In other words, it can be inferred that climatic conditions have created differences in the distribution of plants and animals, as well as differences in ethnological characteristics such as human migration, settlement, and the formation of communities, which have resulted in the formation and maintenance of differences between northern and southern dialects over a long period of time.

● Map COMPOSIT BORDERS OF LANGUAGES OF LANGUAGES, CULTURE AND CLIMATE IN ASIA (from ABE 2013)



- ▲—▲ North-south dividing line for the use of “he 河” and “jiang 江” in river names of China
- ▽—▽ North-south dividing line for the use of “xi(chi) 溪” and “gou(kou) 溝” in river names of China
- Isothermal line at 0 Degrees Celsius (coldest month: January)
- Isohyetal line at 1000 mm per year
- ◆—◆ Faunal realm (palaearctic realm - oriental realm)

Figure 1.13: Composite borders of languages, culture, and climate in Asia (From Abe 2013a: 509, *Tōyō Bunka Kenkyū* 15).

● Map COMPOSIT BORDERS OF LANGUAGES OF LANGUAGES, CULTURE AND CLIMATE IN EUROPE from ABE 2013)

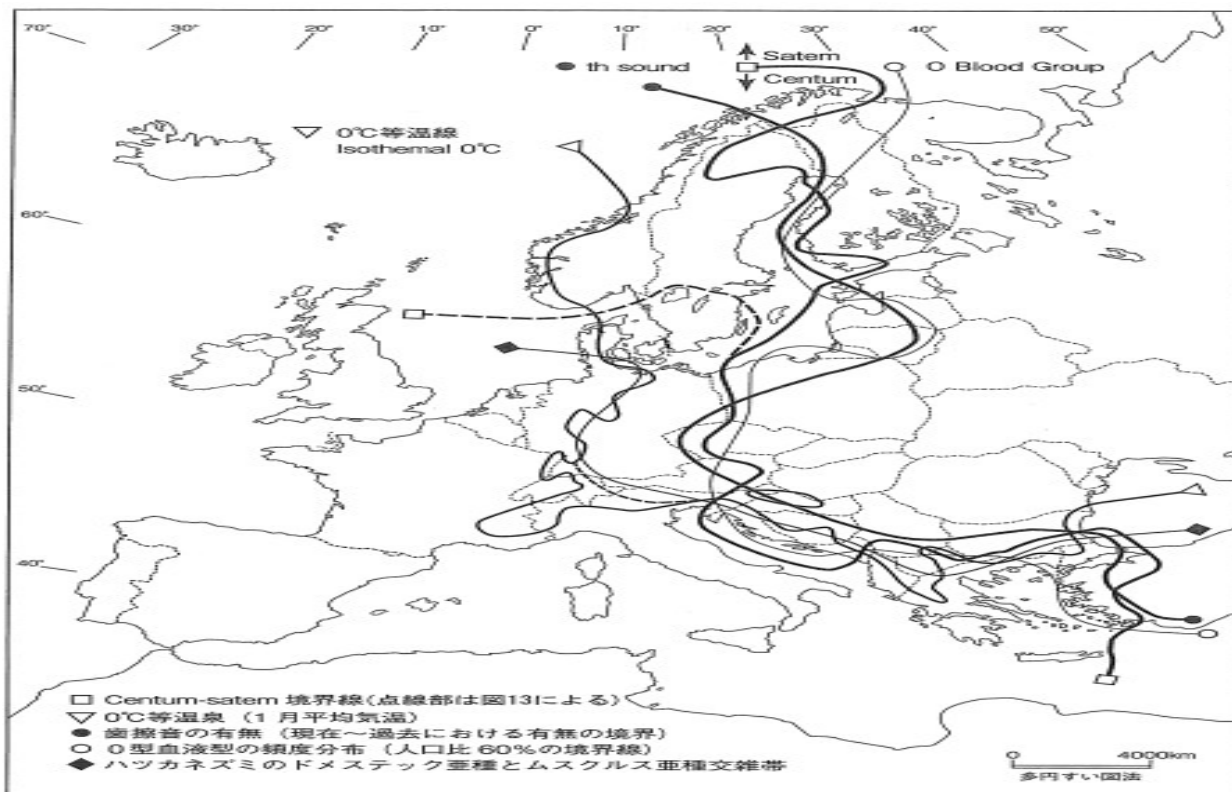


図 21 ヨーロッパにおける言語・文化・気候の複合境界線 (安部)

4. The “Monsoon Asia Substratum” and the Altaic Superstratum

This paper has examined the study of Japanese and East Asian Hydronym.

The section above argues for the existence of a cultural substratum in the Monsoon Asia region. Considering this substratum as well as overlapping areas of rivername and classifier distributions, both of which form significant parts of the basic vocabulary in any language, it can be assumed that a linguistic substratum was once formed in this region at some point in history. The substratum, in turn, has evolved into different languages in different regions, eventually turning into various language families and / or languages of unknown origin in the Asian Pacific region. As such, this hypothetical linguistic substratum should help explain the developmental process of the Japanese and Korean languages as follows.

As for Korean, a language closely associated with the Altai, the most convincing of all existing theories for its formation is that of Kim (1983): Though Korean belongs to the Altai family, it is highly likely that the language has been influenced another, non-Altaic substratum or a language prevalent in the ancient Korean Peninsula. Yet, this non-Altaic substratum has remained unidentified in previous studies. Now, the “Monsoon Asia” substratum can be assumed the same as the “non-Altaic substratum” Kim (1983) advances. If so, it can be argued that the Korean language is based on two layers of linguistic strata: the Monsoon Asia substratum and the Altaic superstratum.

The origin and formation of the Japanese language can be explained similarly. One of the strongest existing genealogical explanations for Japanese is the one that it is based on two linguistic layers, one of the languages distributed in the south of Japan at the bottom and an Altaic language such as Korean on top.

Language / Strata	Substratum	Intercalary Stratum	Superstratum
Japanese	*Proto-MA languages	Austronesian	Altaic Language
Korean	*Proto-MA languages	×	Altaic Language

This hypothesis nicely accounts for the fact that Korean has little influence of Austronesian while Japanese has the following three linguistic features only shared with Austronesian: a) a 4-vowel system (found in ancient Japanese); b) open syllabic structure, c) common basic vocabulary (especially in words for body parts). These similarities suggest that Japanese has been strongly influenced by Austronesian, apart from its Monsoon Asia substratum.

The claim advanced here is a new and unique one in that it can explain similarities and differences between Korean and Japanese using the Monsoon substratum and the Austronesian intercalary stratum. In Map 2, boundaries of the Monsoon Asia substratum and the Altaic superstratum in Korean Peninsula and Japanese Archipelago are indicated.

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Appendix: Distribution Maps: *****