【Handout at the presentation：Distribution Maps and list of river names】

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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.

Keywords: river names, hydronym, East Asian languages, Japanese, Geolinguistics, Historical Stratification of Japanese River Names

1. Introduction

From a linguistic-geographical perspective, Japanese river names (*hydronyms*) constitute an important source of evidence for investigating the historical formation of the Japanese language. Because geographical names tend to be more resistant to lexical replacement than ordinary vocabulary, they may preserve linguistic features that originated in earlier periods and among populations whose languages subsequently disappeared or underwent substantial change.

In my research on Japanese and East Asian hydronyms, I have proposed that the present distribution of Japanese terms for rivers, streams, wetlands, valleys, and related geographical features reflects the **superposition of several linguistic and cultural strata**. From this perspective, Japanese hydronymy should not necessarily be understood as the product of a single, homogeneous linguistic tradition. Rather, it may preserve traces of successive contacts among populations and languages within the Japanese archipelago and the wider East and Southeast Asian regions.

The following chronological outline presents my perspective while distinguishing between geographical-linguistic observations and hypotheses concerning their historical interpretation.

2. The Earliest Possible Stratum: Southern and Monsoon-Asian Connections

- The earliest linguistic layer potentially preserved in Japanese hydronymy may predate the formation of historically recognizable Japanese.

- I suggest that some hydronymic elements may be understood in relation to the wider **Monsoon Asian linguistic and cultural sphere**.
- This hypothesis is based partly on the observation that the Japanese archipelago was historically connected to neighboring regions through maritime networks and population movements.
- From this perspective, some geographical terms traditionally regarded as simply "native Japanese" may conceivably preserve elements belonging to older linguistic strata.
- I therefore propose that the oldest layer of Japanese hydronymy should not automatically be equated with Old Japanese. Some forms may instead represent a **pre-Japanese substratum**, although their precise linguistic affiliations remain a matter for further comparative investigation.
- In my recent discussion of *sawa* (沢) and *shiga* (シガ／related forms), I further consider the possibility that these forms have relationships with Austronesian vocabulary. I present this as a hypothesis concerning historical linguistic connections rather than as an established etymological fact.
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3. The Formation of an Early Japanese Hydronymic System

- As populations and languages became established in the Japanese archipelago, earlier geographical names were not necessarily eliminated when new linguistic systems emerged.
- Older names could instead be retained, reinterpreted, adapted phonologically, or combined with vocabulary belonging to later linguistic communities.
- My approach therefore emphasizes the possibility of a **layered hydronymic system**, in which terms belonging to different historical strata coexist and exhibit geographically patterned distributions.
- From this perspective, the historical significance of an individual river name lies not only in its etymology but also in its **geographical distribution and relationship to other hydronymic elements**.
- Terms such as *kawa* (川), *tani* (谷), *sawa* (沢), *numa* (沼), and *ike* (池), as well as forms such as *nai*, should consequently be investigated as components of a broader historical geography of language.
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4. *Nai*, *Numa*, and *Tani*: Possible Northern and Continental Connections

- A further linguistic stratum may be represented by hydronymic elements whose distributions extend beyond the core area of historically documented Japanese.
- I have drawn attention to *nai* in particular because related forms occur in Japanese, Ainu, and Korean contexts.
- I suggest that the geographical distribution of *nai* may provide evidence for an ancient zone of linguistic contact extending across parts of northern East Asia.
- Similarly, I have discussed *numa* (沼) in connection with forms found in Ainu and Korean and have considered the possibility of historical relationships among them.
- With regard to *tani* (谷), I have proposed a possible connection with Korean. This should be understood as a **comparative-historical hypothesis**, rather than as definitive proof that the Japanese word was directly borrowed from Korean.

- These observations suggest that some Japanese hydronymic vocabulary may preserve traces of linguistic interaction predating the fully developed historical Japanese language.
- I therefore regard the relevant evidence as indicating **possible linguistic affiliations or contact relationships**, rather than as demonstrating simple one-way borrowing.

5. The Emergence of Regional Differentiation within Japan

- As Japanese developed historically, the Japanese archipelago became differentiated into regional linguistic zones.
- The geographical distribution of hydronymic terminology provides evidence that some of these regional divisions may have considerable historical depth.
- Different terms for rivers, streams, marshes, ponds, valleys, and related geographical features frequently display overlapping but non-identical distributions.
- In my studies of the Kantō region, I have demonstrated how such distributions can be examined in relation to major Japanese dialect boundaries.
- From this perspective, dialect boundaries should not necessarily be regarded as merely recent divisions within an originally uniform language. Some may preserve traces of **older population movements, linguistic contacts, and successive waves of linguistic change**.
- Hydronymic geography can therefore contribute to reconstructing the historical formation of Japanese dialects.

6. Hydronymic Distributions within the Wider East Asian Context

- My research places Japanese hydronymy within a broader comparative framework encompassing Japanese, Korean, and Chinese.
- In Chinese, for example, the geographical distributions of terms such as *jiang* (江), *he* (河), *xi* (溪), and *gou* (溝) display regional patterns that can be considered alongside Japanese hydronymic distributions.
- I argue that such parallels make it useful to investigate the linguistic geography of Japan as part of a wider **East Asian and Monsoon Asian system**, rather than as an isolated national phenomenon.
- In this framework, the geographical distribution of hydronymic vocabulary may intersect with climatic, ecological, and cultural divisions.
- I have also explored relationships between linguistic distributions and the broad north–south differentiation of East Asian languages.
- Such correspondences should not, however, be interpreted as evidence of a simple causal relationship between climate and language. Rather, they suggest that ecological conditions, human mobility, cultural transmission, and linguistic diffusion may have interacted over long periods.

7. The Korean Peninsula as a Zone of Linguistic Contact

- The Korean Peninsula occupies a particularly important geographical position in any reconstruction of the linguistic history of the Japanese archipelago.
- It constitutes a potential corridor and contact zone between continental East Asia and the Japanese islands.

- My comparison of Japanese and Korean hydronymic vocabulary has led me to propose possible historical relationships involving forms such as *tani* and *numa*.
- These proposed relationships should not be reduced to a model of simple Korean-to-Japanese borrowing.
- Rather, I suggest the possibility of **older areal relationships and successive episodes of linguistic interaction**, in which the Japanese archipelago, the Korean Peninsula, and continental East Asia participated in a broader network of linguistic contact.
- Accordingly, I consider the evidence in terms of **possible common inheritance, areal diffusion, contact, or historical cognacy**, depending on the individual lexical item.

8. *Sawa* and *Shiga*: A Hypothesis of Southern Linguistic Influence

- A particularly important recent development in my research concerns *sawa* (沢) and *shiga* (シガ／氷 and related forms).
- I propose that these hydronymic elements may have relationships with Austronesian vocabulary.
- I further suggest that their geographical distribution may preserve evidence of southern linguistic influence on the Japanese archipelago.
- Importantly, my argument does not merely concern the etymology of two individual words. I consider the possibility that their geographical distributions point to a broader historical process of linguistic contact.
- On this basis, I hypothesize that southern linguistic influence may have reached the Japanese archipelago **on more than one occasion**, rather than being attributable to a single migration or cultural transmission event.
- This hypothesis, if supported by further comparative and geographical evidence, would favor a model of **repeated contact, diffusion, and linguistic restructuring** over a simple one-directional migration model.
- At present, however, I regard the proposed Austronesian relationship as a **hypothesis concerning the historical origin and development of these forms**, rather than as an established fact.

9. Hydronyms and the Formation of Historical Japanese

- By the time Japanese entered its historically documented period, the language may already have incorporated several linguistic layers resulting from inheritance, contact, borrowing, and regional differentiation.
- Written records provide essential evidence for the historical development of Japanese, but they necessarily represent only those linguistic forms that were recorded in writing.
- Hydronyms can complement such documentary evidence because many geographical names have survived outside the literary tradition.
- They may consequently preserve traces of linguistic situations that are poorly represented or entirely absent from historical texts.
- I therefore regard hydronymy as an important complementary source for investigating the **prehistory and early history of Japanese**.

10. River Names and Japanese Dialect Geography

- The geographical distribution of hydronymic vocabulary can also illuminate the formation of Japanese dialects.
- In particular, hydronymic distributions sometimes correspond with, cross, or overlap with dialect boundaries.
- In my study of the Kantō region, I demonstrated that river-related geographical terms can reveal a complex pattern of **linguistic layering**.
- Such patterns suggest that regional Japanese varieties may have developed through the interaction of inherited vocabulary, linguistic innovation, and contact among different speech communities.
- Consequently, the modern dialect map of Japan may be interpreted, at least in part, as a historical record of successive linguistic processes.

11. A Stratified Model of Japanese Hydronymy

From my perspective, the present Japanese hydronymic landscape can tentatively be interpreted as the result of several overlapping historical processes:

- a possible ancient southern or Monsoon-Asian linguistic substratum;
- subsequent northern and continental linguistic contacts;
- possible linguistic interaction involving the Korean Peninsula;
- the emergence and diffusion of early Japanese;
- regional differentiation within the Japanese archipelago;
- later processes of linguistic diffusion and reinterpretation; and
- the survival of older geographical names within later linguistic systems.

These processes should not be understood as a simple chronological sequence in which one linguistic layer completely replaced another. Rather, older and newer layers may have **coexisted, interacted, and been partially reinterpreted**.

Japanese hydronymy may therefore be compared to a linguistic palimpsest: a geographical record in which successive linguistic communities left traces that were preserved, modified, and incorporated into subsequent systems.

12. Conclusion

From this perspective, the historical distribution of Japanese river names provides an important source of evidence for investigating the formation of Japanese and its regional varieties.

The central proposition emerging from my research is that Japanese hydronymy is **historically stratified rather than linguistically homogeneous**. Its geographical distribution may reflect multiple episodes of linguistic contact involving the Japanese archipelago, the Korean Peninsula, continental East Asia, and the southern maritime world.

The distribution of forms such as *nai*, *numa*, *tani*, *sawa*, and related hydronymic elements is therefore significant not merely because these words designate rivers, wetlands, valleys, or other geographical features. Their distributions may preserve information about historical relationships among linguistic communities over considerable periods of time.

At the same time, the individual etymological interpretations proposed in my research should be distinguished from established historical facts. The possible relationship of *tani* with Korean, the possible relationship of *numa* and *nai* with Ainu and Korean forms, and particularly the proposed

Austronesian connections of *sawa* and *shiga* should be described as **hypotheses, proposals, or possibilities**, unless independently corroborated by broader comparative evidence.
The hypothesis concerning *sawa* and *shiga* is especially noteworthy because I suggest that southern linguistic influence may have reached the Japanese archipelago more than once. This interpretation invites a model of Japanese linguistic history based not on a single ancestral population or a single migration, but on **repeated movements, contacts, diffusion, retention, and linguistic restructuring**.
Japanese river names may thus be regarded as more than a history of geographical naming. They constitute a potentially valuable **historical linguistic map of the Japanese archipelago and its connections with surrounding regions**. By integrating hydronymic geography with dialectology, comparative linguistics, archaeology, historical geography, and the study of human mobility, we may develop a more nuanced account of the formation of Japanese—one that recognizes the cumulative effects of multiple linguistic and cultural encounters.

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