CHAPTER 1

A brief history of Japanese dialect research and dialect classification

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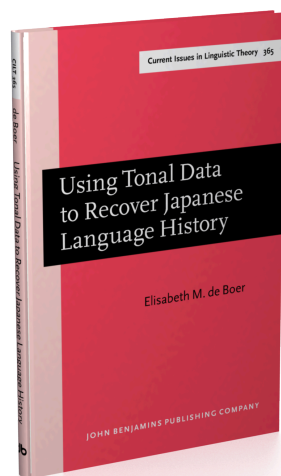
A brief history of Japanese dialect research and dialect classification

From the early part of the 20th century, linguists have tried to classify the dialects of Japanese. Tonal phonology has played a significant part in their efforts.

1.1 Dialect distinctions in Old Japanese

An awareness of dialectal differences in Japan dates back to the Old Japanese (OJ) period (ca. 700–800). The oldest recorded dialect variation in Japan concerns the opposition between Central Old Japanese (COJ), the court language of the Yamato area, and Eastern Old Japanese (EOJ), the dialect of the eastern provinces. The poems included in the chronicles *Kojiki* (712) and *Nihon shoki* (720), and in the poetry collection *Man'yōshū* (the last poem in which was written in 759) and mostly in COJ. Many poems in books 14 and 20 of *Man'yōshū* are considered to be in a distinct variety, EOJ.

Book 14 of *Man'yōshū* includes the *Azuma-uta*, poems from the eastern provinces, but also some poems in COJ. Book 20 records the *sakimori-uta,* poems by border guards sent from the eastern provinces to serve in Kyūshū. Despite these primary sources, the phonology of EOJ is not very clear because the spelling of these eastern poems was based on the orthographic conventions used to write COJ, and seem to have been applied to EOJ in a rather impressionistic way. The clearest differences that can be identified between the two dialects are therefore morphological, and in this respect EOJ appears to have been the more conservative variety. Certain spellings are, however, suggestive of phonological differences. The syllable /ti/ is, for instance, often replaced by /si/ in EOJ, which may indicate that the shift from [ti] to [tɕi], now common all over Japan, had already taken place in EOJ.

After the OJ period, dialect differences were seldom remarked upon until the early 20th century. Dialectology grew out of the need to establish a standard language – especially a unified written language – for use in basic education and public life. An important step was the collection of data on phonology and grammar undertaken by the Kokugo chōsa iinkai in 1904.

The results of the survey were published in two volumes, one on phonology (1905) and one on grammar (1906), including 29 and 37 maps, respectively, show-

ing the distributions of features by region. An important discovery that came out of this research was a bundle of isoglosses (boundaries with different speech forms on each side) cutting across Honshū roughly along the southern edge of the Japan Alps. In the popular imagination, these isoglosses, which divide modern dialects into western and eastern types, are often projected back into the OJ period and associated with COJ and EOJ, respectively; however, they are actually located farther to the west of the borders of the ancient Eastern provinces, and the present-day differences between the dialects on the either side of the isoglosses began to emerge centuries after the OJ period.[3]

1.2   Tōjō's division of Japanese into 'dialect areas'

The survey by the *Kokugo chōsa iinkai* initiated dialect classification in Japan. In 1927, Tōjō Misao, who had been in charge of the survey, was the first to publish such a classification. This took the form of a map (Figure 1.1) with accompanying explanations:
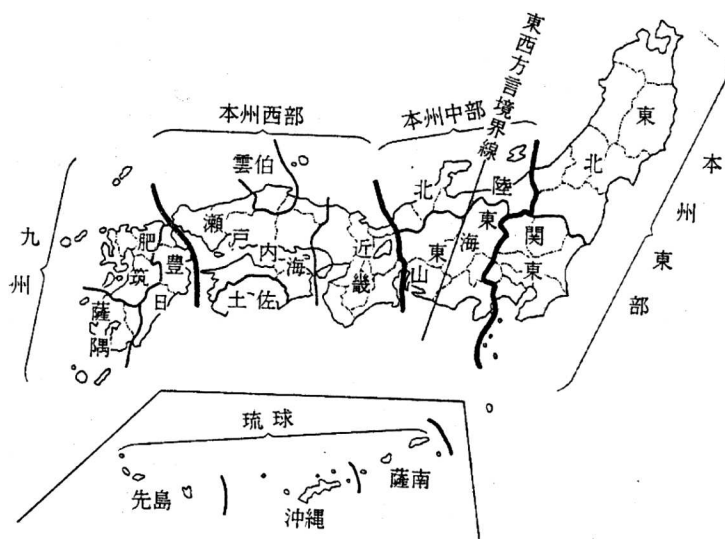

Figure 1.1 Tōjō's dialect division of 1927 (From Katō 1977:58)

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3. Poems from the old provinces of Kōzuke, Kai, and Suruga, and points farther east, showed EOJ characteristics. What are now western Shizuoka and Nagano did not belong to the EOJ dialect area.

Tōjō's partitioning of large areas into increasingly smaller areas gives the appearance of a family tree, but it was not based on comparative principles, under which branches are grouped the basis of shared innovations. Tōjō's classification simply labeled areas based on the assumption that currently adjacent dialects were necessarily related historically. He called his model the 'dialect area theory'.

Tōjō amended his classification several times. One issue that he approached in different ways was the classification of the dialects of central Honshū lying close to the isoglosses that divided the dialects into eastern and western halves. As not all of these isoglosses coincided, especially near the Pacific, he first posited an in-between group of central dialects in which eastern and western features were mixed. Interestingly, in his last proposal for classification (the map accompanying the *Zenkoku hōgen jiten* of 1951), he included data on tone, which for the most part had not been available at the time of his earlier classifications.
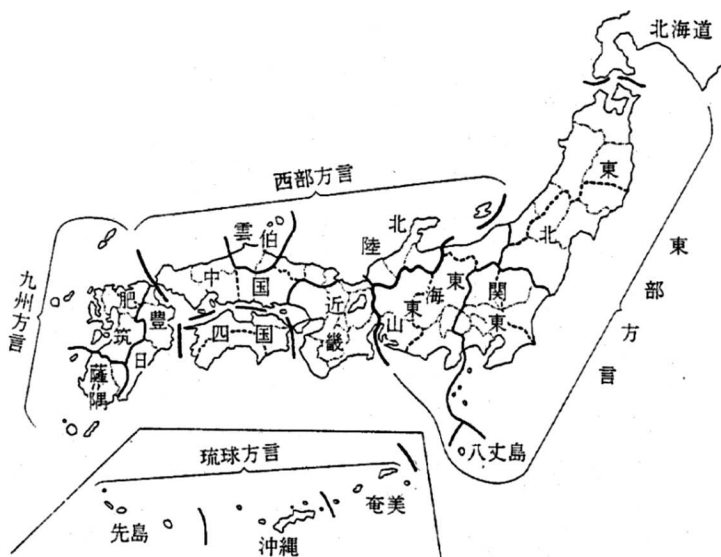

Figure 1.2 Tōjō's dialect division of 1951 (From Katō 1977: 62)

In 1930, Hattori Shirō had discovered that the boundary between the Tōkyō type and Kyōto type tone systems lies far more to the west than the bundle of grammatical isoglosses that bisected Honshū. This discovery influenced later researchers greatly. Hattori argued that grammatical forms were relatively simple to learn, and that any dialect border based on them would be very unstable. Tonal distinctions, on the other hand, were distinctive for almost every word, and were therefore much more resistant to imitation. Dialect borders drawn on the basis of tone patterns necessarily represented a very old situation since the borrowing of

entire strata of phonological structure is highly unlikely. As Kyōto type speech had for centuries been culturally prestigious, it would naturally have tended to spread its influence, and the people of central Honshū had, in the course of time, adopted those elements of Kyōto type speech that were easy to learn. Nevertheless, they had retained the tonal patterns of individual words, which revealed the eastern origin of the dialects they spoke.

Influenced by Hattori's discovery, Tōjō decided that all dialects to the east of the tonal line should be classed as belonging to the eastern Japanese dialects (see Figure 1.2). This put the dialects of Fukui, Ishikawa and Toyama in the West Japan dialect group, while the dialects of Gifu, Aichi, the southern half of Niigata, and Nagano, Shizuoka, and Yamanashi were assigned to the East Japan group. The Tosa dialect on Shikoku, which Tōjō had earlier separated from the other dialects on the island because it preserved the distinctions /zi/ ≠ /di/ and /zu/ ≠ /du/ (lost in most other dialects), was now included with other Shikoku dialects based because they all share a Kyōto type tone system.

In 1949, Tsuzuku Tsuneo published a classification that also took into account certain tonal distinctions (see Figure 1.3).
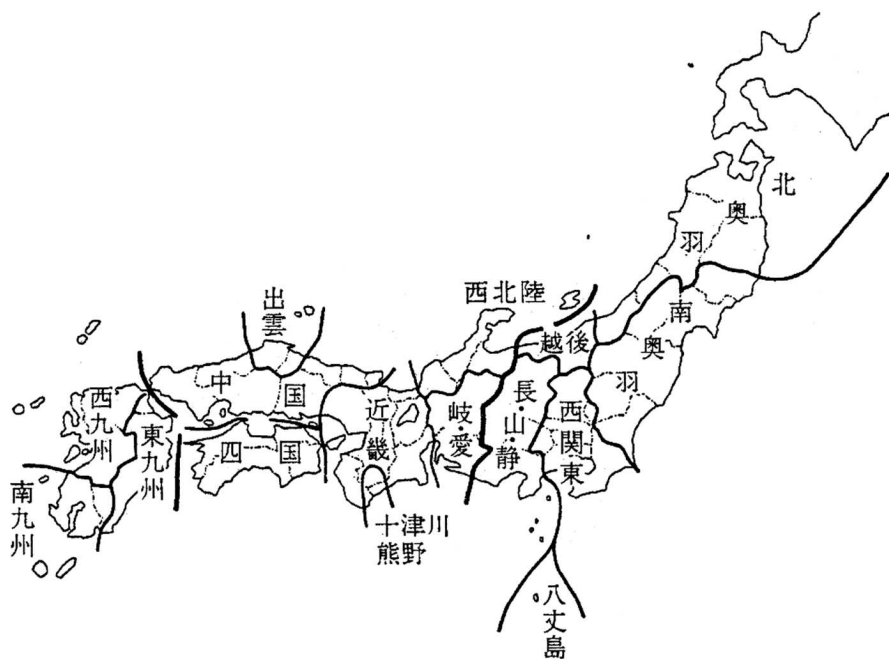

Figure 1.3 Tsuzuku's dialect division of 1949 (From: Katō 1977: 65)

He included the eastern part of the Kantō region in a Southern Tōhoku dialect group, and Hokkaidō (which was settled by Japanese only after the Meiji Restoration) in a Northern Tōhoku dialect group, keeping the western Kantō dialects separate.

Including the eastern part of the Kantō region in the Southern Tōhoku group was based mostly on the fact that dialects in this area, like those in the southern Tōhoku region, lacked lexical tone. Furthermore, just as Izumo formed a dialect island along the Sea of Japan coast, separate from the Chūgoku dialects of southwestern Honshū, Tsuzuku posited a dialect island along the Pacific coast in the southern Kinki region, consisting of the Totsukawa and Kumano dialects. The special status of Totsukawa was based on the fact that it had a Tōkyō type tone system despite being located in the midst of Kyōto type tone dialects, and had preserved a remarkable number of archaic features. By grouping it together with Kumano, which shares some of these features, Tsuzuku avoided making Totsukawa a completely surrounded dialect island.

Unlike Tōjō, who had considered Gifu and Aichi to be eastern dialects (they did not have Kyōto type tone systems), Tsuzuku regarded them as western dialects because he accorded particular value to the grammatical isoglosses included in the *Kokugo Chōsa Iinkai* survey. More specifically, Tsuzuku put Gifu-Aichi in his western group, and Echigo (the southern part of Niigata), Nagano, Yamanashi and Shizuoka in his eastern group. A classification of the main-island dialects into areas along the lines proposed by Tōjō, but with his central dialects reassigned to the eastern or the western group as proposed by Tsuzuku, is still considered orthodox in Japanese dialectology to this day.

1.3   A division into 'front of Japan' and 'back of Japan' dialects

Many researchers have been struck by the fact that certain sets of phonological features in Japan recur in disjoint areas. This kind of distribution is visible in both tone systems and in segmental phonology. A distribution in peripheral disjoint areas often means that an innovative feature spreading from a central location failed to reach two or more outlying regions, creating remnant areas that preserve certain archaisms. In case of Japan, however, most of the recurring features in the disjoint areas are clearly historical innovations, making it implausible to account for them as multiple parallel developments. Even if some of them were, the fact that multiple features typically co-occur together in the same disjoint regions needs to be explained.

These considerations have led to the idea that, at some point in the past, Japanese dialects were divided into an *omote Nihon* 'front of Japan' group, along the Pacific coast, and an *ura Nihon* 'back of Japan' group, along the Sea of Japan coast, sometimes including parts of Kyūshū. The earliest article dealing with resemblances among dialects along the Sea of Japan coast appears to be Fujiwara Yoichi 1951. In this paper, Fujiwara takes the reader on a virtual tour along the Sea of Japan coast, and gives an impressionistic view of the similarities he noticed. Kindaichi (1954) subscribed to an *omote/ura* division of dialects based on segmental phonology, but, unlike Fujiwara, excluded Kyūshū (Figure 1.4).

In Kindaichi's view, the *ura* dialects once had a far wider distribution than they have currently. They were pushed into their present enclaves by an expansion of *omote* dialects. The combination of features typical of the *ura* dialects had once been widely shared along the Sea of Japan coast before this expansion.
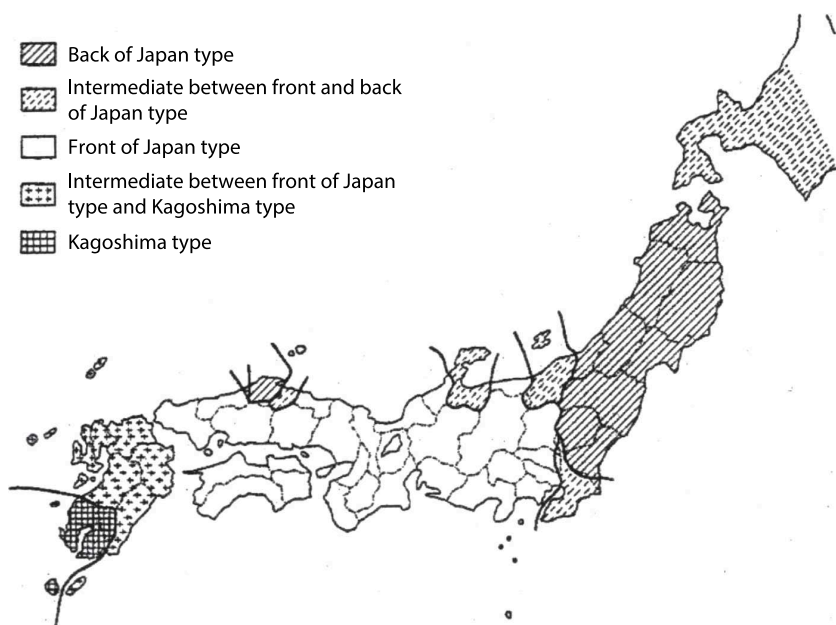

Figure 1.4 Kindaichi's map (1953) of the 'front of Japan' and 'back of Japan' dialect groups (From Mase 1977: 75)

1.4   A division of the dialects in concentric rings

The first scholar to argue that dialects were distributed in rings formed by concentric circles around Kyōto was Yanagita Kunio, Japan's foremost ethnologist and folklorist of the prewar period. For him, the story of Japan's cultural history was one of fashion and innovation in the capital, which gradually spread outward into the countryside. Yanagita interpreted differences among Japanese dialects in the same way, comparing the diffusion of new words from the central urban and cultural hub to the ripples a stone makes when thrown into a pond. In his classic article *Kagyū kō* (A study of words for 'snail', 1927), Yanagita showed how older forms tended to be preserved in remote, disjoint locations. Perhaps a better analogy would be dripping watery paint of different colors onto a large ball at a single point: the first color has the longest time to spread and colors a large area; the second does not reach quite as far by the time we observe it; the third covers an even smaller area; and so on.

Kindaichi proposed something similar, first in 1955 and later, in a more expanded version, in 1964, but based on phonology (including tone) instead of lexical items (Figure 1.5). In his terminology, central Japanese dialects with a Kyōto type tone system belonged to an 'inner circle' (*nairin*). The dialects with Tōkyō type tone systems surrounding them belonged to a 'middle circle' (*chūrin*). Dialects of the Tōhoku region, Kyūshū, and Izumo, which showed different patterns of the tone class mergers and sometimes quite different phonologies, occupied an 'outer ring' (*gairin*).[4]

The center/periphery distribution of dialect features stressed by Kindaichi is reminiscent of Yanagita's model, yet crucially different in one respect. Kindaichi did not see the outer dialects as areas where older features tended to be preserved. Rather, he saw the outer dialects as areas where there was less constraint, and a tendency for older distinctions to collapse. Especially in regard to phonology, including the tonal distinctions, he regarded the center as conservative.

The idea of a back of Japan dialect that was gradually pushed to remote corners suggests that these dialects are similar because they were historically related. It explains similarities between far-flung regions (whether archaisms or shared innovations) in a way that agrees with the usual assumptions of dialect geography. Kindaichi's circle theory, on the other hand, posited independent parallel developments in peripheral areas as the core mechanism of language change in Japan.

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4. The fact that there is a Gairin area in Aichi/Shizuoka region is not yet reflected in Kindaichi's 1964 map.
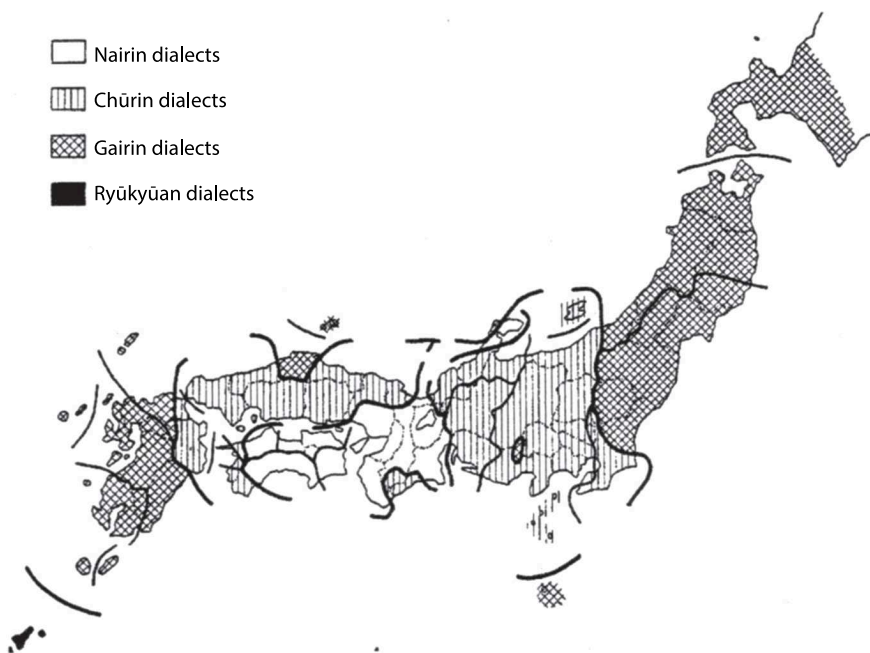
Figure 1.5 Kindaichi's division (1964) of the Japanese dialects into concentric circles (From: Katō 1977: 69)

1.5   The concentric ring model of Tōkyō type dialects

In 1977, Kindaichi repurposed his terms Nairin, Chūrin and Gairin. They would now refer only to different subtypes of Tōkyō type dialects. The basic idea was that each of the three Tōkyō subtypes has merged the tone classes of proto-Japanese in a different way. This strictly tonally based definition is the way these terms are still used today, and throughout this book. The most detailed map on the Japanese tone systems also uses this system (Wurm & Hattori 1981). Figure 1.6 is a simplified version of this map and includes two corrections: the Tōkyō type tone system on Shikoku belongs to the Chūrin type, not to the Nairin type as erroneously indicated on the 1983 map; and the tone systems on the Noto peninsula, including Noto island (not shown), and Toyama are of the Nairin type, not the Kyōto type (McCawley 1966; de Boer 2010: 165–177). I distinguish them from other Nairin dialects because they appear to be more archaic and to have undergone a local innovation, which made Kindaichi mistakenly assign them to the Kyōto type.

Despite the change in definitions, the term Gairin still designates dialects that have certain features in common even though they are widely separated from each other geographically. These features do not appear to be archaisms.
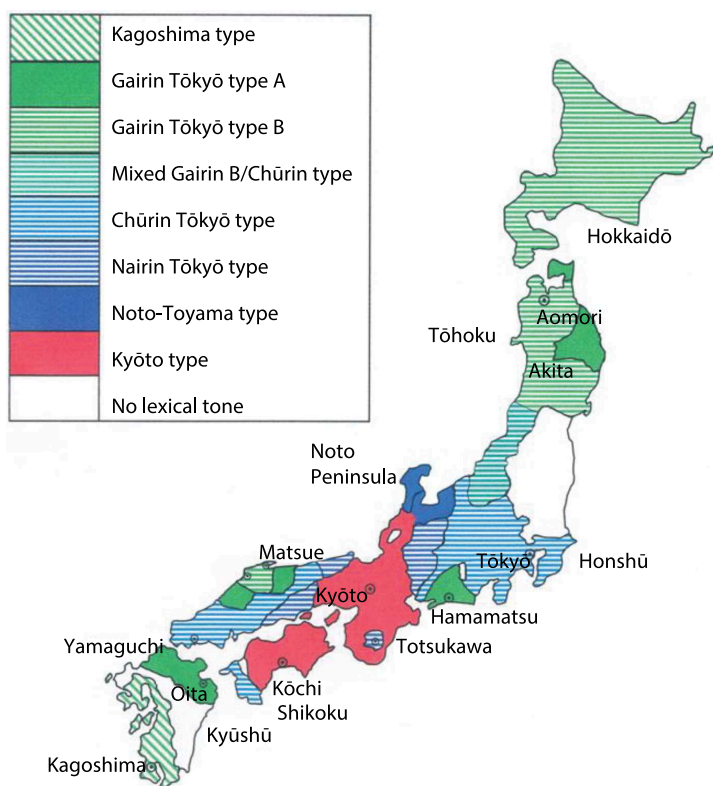
Figure 1.6 Map of the Japanese tone systems

Dialect borders that are based on differences in how pJ tone classes merged must have been stable once established. Since each class contained hundreds of words, once entire tone classes merged in a dialect, its speakers would find it virtually impossible to restore the old distinction. In any case, they would have no reason to restore the distinction since the functional load of tone in all forms of Japanese is very low. This means that the borders between the Gairin and other tone systems probably changed little once the mergers between the tone classes that set Gairin dialects apart occurred.