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# The Study of the Ainu Language

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this short essay is to introduce to the readers the general knowledge about the Ainu people and their language, as well as to stress the urgency of the linguistic and cultural study. In addition, as a case study, I discuss the problem of ‘glide insertion’ in Ainu in some detail. In previous studies the glides in question have been supposed to be perfectly predictable from the phonological environment. Therefore, they have often been ignored in phonological notation. However, I argue that there are a number of cases in which these glides do not happen in spite of the same environment. In short, the appearance of the glides is not only controlled by the phonological environment, but also depends strongly on the morphological properties of the preceding elements. The glides serve to make a given word-structure more transparent. This claim is supported by a number of facts. First, the phenomenon (the occurrence or non-occurrence of the glides) can be seen clearly in the soundspectrograms of the forms in question. The claim is also supported by studying Ainu texts written by an Ainu native speaker him/herself. In fact, we can find that the glides in question are almost always clearly written, for example, in Yukie Chiri’s famous Ainu text *Ainu shinyoshu* (a collection of Ainu epics of gods). Moreover, there is morpho-syntactic evidence as well as phonological for the significance of these glides. We should predict that the non-occurrence of the glides indicates the independent nature of the preceding element. This is supported by the fact that nominal forms with the prefix *si-* ‘oneself’, which does not trigger glide insertion, cannot always be incorporated, but may be separated from verbs (i. e. expressed syntactically) in the Horobetsu dialect of Ainu.

## 1. Introduction

The Ainu are the indigenous people of Hokkaido. They formerly lived in the southern part of Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands. So most of the place-names of these areas can be interpreted by Ainu. For example, ‘Sapporo 札幌’, the name of the city where Hokkaido University is situated, is supposed to mean “a large, dry (place)” in Ainu. We can also see from place-names that people who used the Ainu language once lived even in the northern part of Japan proper (Tohoku district) in very old times. *Ainu* is a self-designation of the Ainu people and it means ‘human beings’. The Ainu culture and language are quite different from those of the Japanese. As a matter of fact, almost all attempts to prove their origin have been fruitless.

The current Ainu population in Hokkaido is estimated at about 24 thousand. They used to live mainly by hunting and gathering before the Meiji Era (about 130 years ago), although at least some of them had already known agriculture up to the latter part of the 18th century in spite of the cold climate. Yet they differ from other hunting-gathering peoples in other countries in that

they settled and made permanent villages near rivers depending on the abundance of salmon and deer. They have developed such a highly elaborated cultural system as represented by the so-called “bear-festival (*iyomante*).” However, they are now living the same life as the Japanese. The traditional culture and language are fast disappearing. Ainu is not a written language and the age of the speakers of Ainu is more than eighty in most cases. The Ainu language can be said to be one of the so-called ‘endangered languages’ in the very sense of the word.

It is not too much to say that the history of the Ainu is the history of incessant exploitation and racial discrimination by the Japanese. Even today there are still many difficult problems concerning the political and economic situation of the Ainu people, which other Japanese could never realize, although a new law for preserving the traditional culture and language of the Ainu people has recently been established by the Japanese government (1997).

## 2. Basic Characteristics of the Ainu Language

In the following sections, I will outline some basic characteristics of the Ainu language. The examples cited below come from Nabe Shirasawa, who was a fluent speaker of the Chitose dialect. I am grateful to her for her kind instruction.

The basic word order is the SOV (Subject-Object-Verb) type, very similar to that of Japanese: A verb is placed at the end of a sentence, and an object precedes it. A modifier is placed before a head:

*episkanne        teppo   pus   hum   neno   hum as.*  
 here and there   gun   burst   sound   like   it sounds  
*ukuran    iyotta   mean   humi   ne   nankor.*  
 last night   most   oold   it seems   it is likely  
 ‘Last night, sounds like gunshot (of trees’ breaking with cold) broke out here  
 and there. Probably it was the coldest last night’.

However, there is also a sharp difference: the negative element may precede a verb phrase. This is quite different from the Japanese negative expression which uses a negative element after a verb:

*somo ku-ipe   na.*  
 not 1SG-eat   FP (=final particle)  
 ‘I won’t eat.’

Aside from word order, there are a number of highly interesting syntactic similarities and differences between Ainu and Japanese. Concerning similarities, for example, as in the above sentence, we find that Ainu, just like Japanese, permits the sort of relativization which cannot be found in a language such as English (i. e., *teppo pus hum*, literally, ‘the sound which a gun was fired’). On the other hand, as an example of interesting syntactic differences, we can give a difference in topicalization. In Ainu, topicalization marked by the topic marker particle is often avoided where Japanese seems to permit it relatively easily:



*turi* ‘pole’ + *ecipo* ‘to propel a boat with’ → [turietʃipo] (not \*[turijetʃipo]) ‘to propel a boat with a pole’

*e-* (applicative prefix) + *ramu* ‘someone’s heart’ + *an* ‘exist’ → [eramuan] (not \*[eram-  
uwan]) ‘to know, to have a knowledge of’

*ru-* ‘in a half way, imperfectly’ + *emina* ‘to laugh at’ → [ruemina] (not \*[ruwemina]) ‘to smile’

As seen from the above, we see that the glides [j] and [w] do not appear mechanically according to the phonological environment. On the contrary, they appear only after the particular morphemes: [j] occurs after *i-* (indefinite prefix), while [w] occurs after *u-* ‘each other’. Moreover, it is important to note that they do not occur after independent stems ending with /i/ or /u/ in spite of the fact that they give rise to the same phonological environments as the prefixes *i-* and *u-* in question. It should be noted that from a purely phonological point of view they must be regarded as exhibiting opposition (i.e., distinctive): the occurrence of the glides cannot be predicted only by taking phonological factors into account. Then, a problem arises: Why does the occurrence of these glides seem to be controlled according to the morphological environment rather than phonological? The answer would not be so simple, but at least, for the present, we may say that the appearance of the glides depends strongly on the morphological properties of the preceding elements, and that they are likely to contribute to making a given word-structure more transparent. However, on the other hand, we cannot ignore the fact that these glides may also have the risk of giving rise to homonymous forms. In this respect, Ainu can be said to be a language which would prefer to indicate the degree of relative independence of a given element at the cost of the clearness of the interpretation in word formation. Incidentally, we can know the surface or “inserted” character of the /y/ in question from the fact that the form *ku-i-omap* ‘I love someone’ does not result in *\*ku-i-y-omap*, but *kuyomap*, subject to not glide insertion but “glide formation”, although it cannot be denied that the inserted [j] qualifies as an independent phoneme in a “structural-linguistic” sense as discussed above. Concisely, the [j] in question is a phoneme in a surface level, but not in a deeper level.

Needless to say, it would be advisable to assure the claim given above by some more objective method. In fact, the situation described above can be seen clearly in the soundspectrograms of the forms in question as well: In Figure 1 below, we can find the existence of the phoneme /y/ with a clearly long duration in the form *i-ye* ‘(he) talked to me’. However, we can also find a similar part of duration like this in Figure 2, which is supposed to contain the form *i-* ‘me’ and *e* ‘to eat’. On the other hand, as is seen from Figure 3, there is no such part between /i/ and /e/ in the compound of the stem *turi* ‘pole’ and *ecipo* ‘to pilot with’. All these facts show that the occurrence of [j] is conditioned not phonologically, but morphologically, and that this [j] as well as [w] correspond to phonemes /y/ and /w/, respectively. Interestingly enough, some prefixes seem to resist glide insertion, while others are obligatorily subject to it. Figure 6 illustrates such a case: the prefix *ru-* ‘somewhat, a little’ does not seem to trigger glide insertion unlike the prefix *u-* ‘each other’. To put it briefly, the indefinite prefix *i-*, the reflexive prefix *si-*

and the reciprocal prefix *u-* exhibit glide insertion, while nominal stems on /i/ or /u/, and the prefix *ru-* do not trigger glide insertion in the Chitose dialect.

Furthermore, such an interpretation as above is supported by studying Ainu texts written by an Ainu native speaker him/herself. We can find that the glides in question are almost always clearly written in Yukie Chiri's famous Ainu text *Ainu shinyoshu* (a collection of Ainu epics of gods):

*iyeutanne* (< i-eutanne) 'to join a group'  
*uweushi* (< u-e-us-i) 'to be located side by side'

However, it should also be noted that there seems to be an important difference among dialects. In the Chitose dialect, the prefix *si-* 'oneself' triggers the glide phoneme /y/, while in the Horobetsu dialect (the dialect of *Ainu shinyoo shuu*), it does not. Moreover, there is a morpho-syntactic difference as well as such a phonological one, with regard to *si-*: In the Chitose dialect, a nominal form with *si-* must not be separated from a verb, but must be incorporated into it, while in the Horobetsu dialect, a form with *si-* attached to a head noun may be separated from a verb. For example:

*a-si-ka-opaste* (the Chitose dialect)  
 1SG-self-upper part-make run to  
 'I made people run to myself. (= to have oneself helped by others)'  
 cf. \**si-ka a-opaste*

*si-enka ci-kuste* (the Horobetsu dialect)  
 self-surface 1SG-let go  
 'I let it go above myself.'

If the occurrence of the glides shows that a given prefix is tightly bound to a following element, the non-occurrence of the glides in the Horobetsu dialect must be conversely considered evidence for the independent nature of *si-* in this dialect and this is also supposed to be supported by the fact that forms with *si-* cannot always be incorporated into verbs in the Horobetsu dialect.

#### 4. Conclusion

Ainu is no doubt an endangered language and thus it is a pressing problem to preserve and revitalize it. For both of these purposes, however, linguistic study is indispensable. We must open our eyes not to overlook hidden characteristics of the Ainu language behind superficial similarities to Japanese. The role of Hokkaido University in this field of study may be estimated as not inconsiderable.

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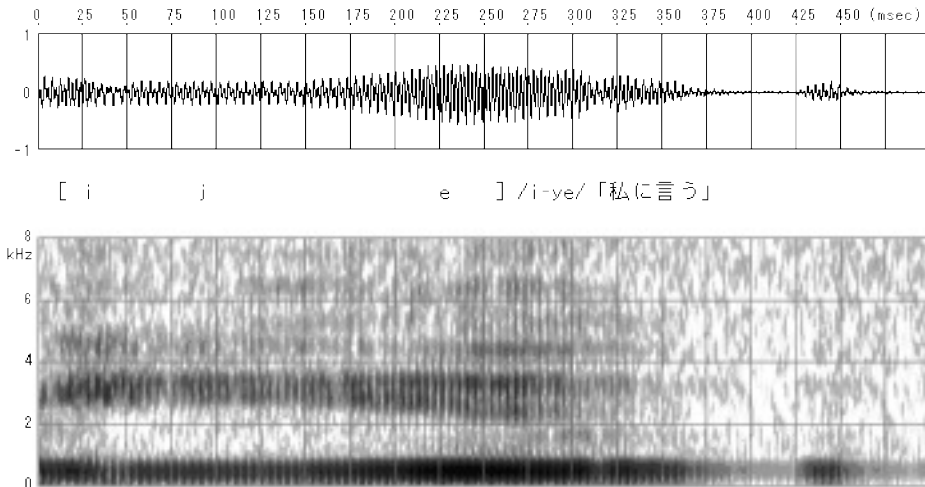


Figure 1 ([ije] in *i-ye* ‘He talks to me’)

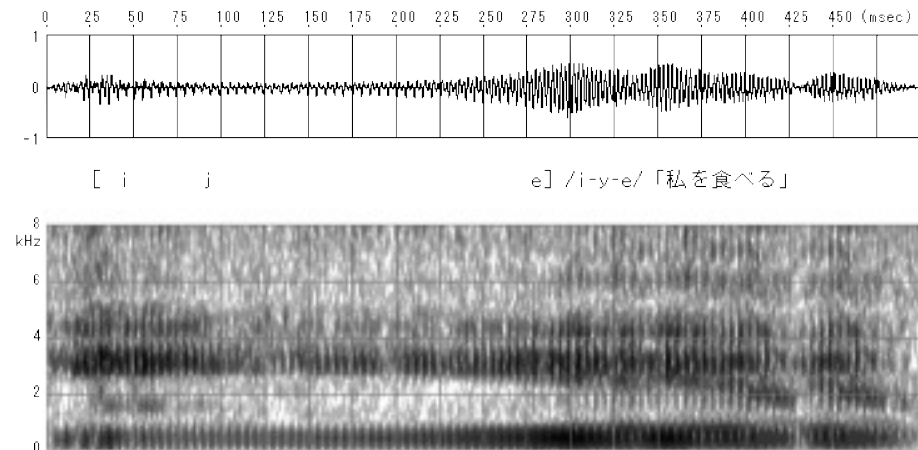


Figure 2 ([ije] in *i-y-e* ‘He eats me.’)

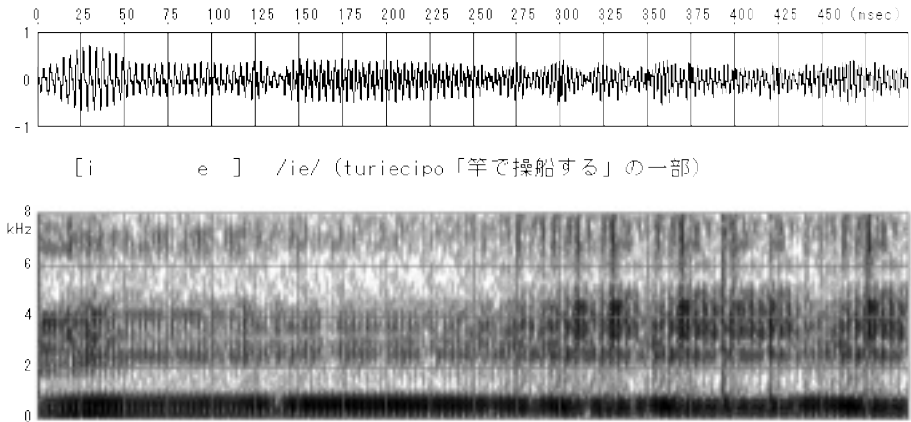


Figure 3 ([ie] in *turiecipo* ‘to pilot a boat with a pole’)

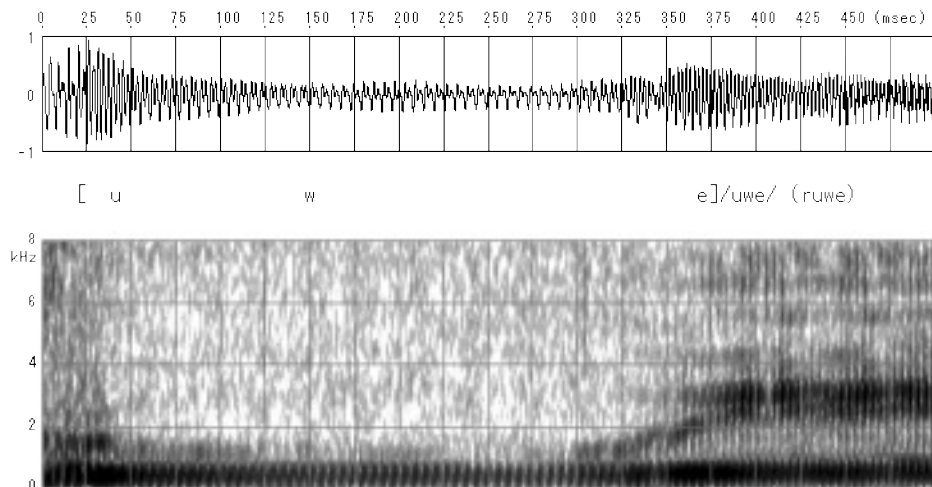


Figure 4 ([uwe] in *ruwe* ‘its trace, footprint’)

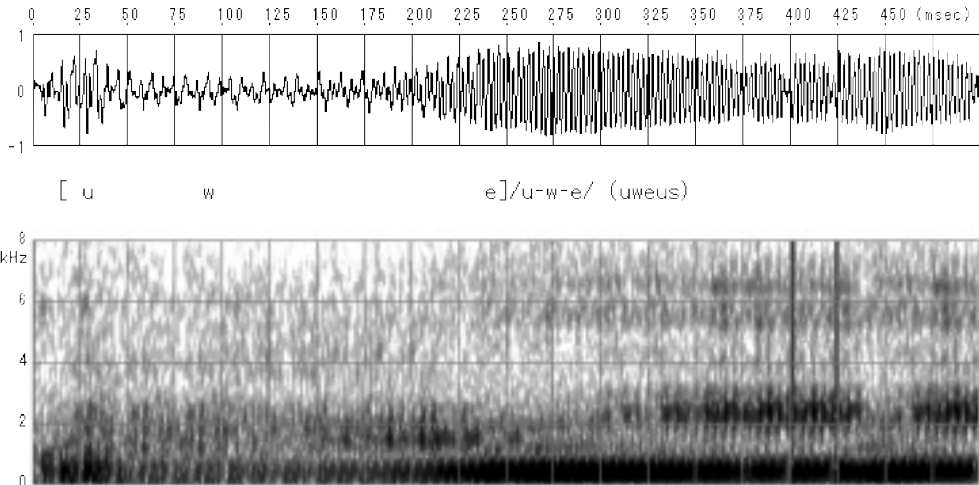


Figure 5 ([uwe] in *uweus* ‘to border each other’)

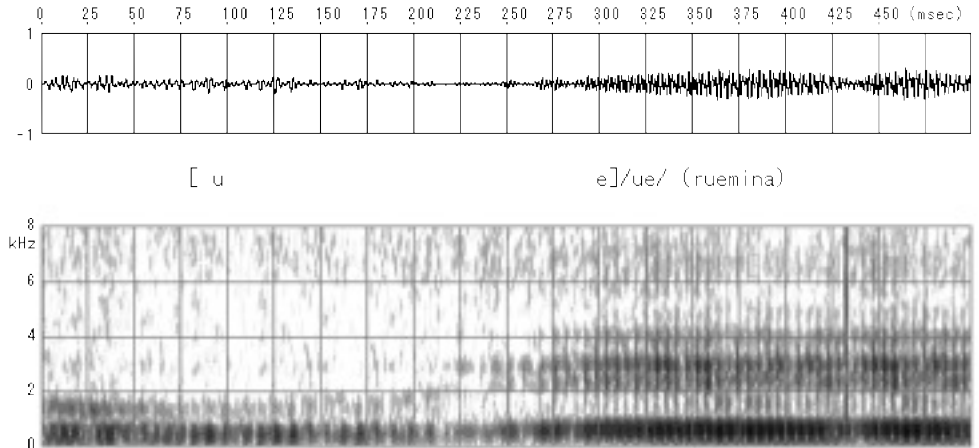


Figure 6 ([uwe] in *ruemina* ‘to smile’)