

Shedding Light on Historical Japanese through the Genes of Dialects



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Born in Niigata Prefecture, 1957. Studied Japanese linguistics at Tohoku University, continuing onto the doctoral program at the Graduate School of Arts and Letters. Worked as a researcher at the Department of Language Change and the National Institute of Japanese Language before assuming his current position. PhD Literature. Titled as Distinguished Professor.

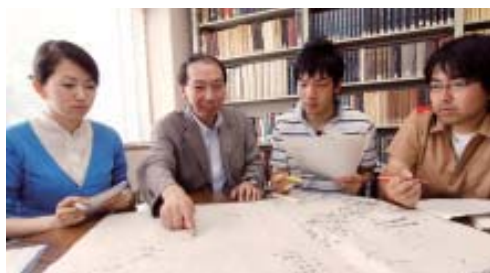
As the common Japanese speech prevails more and more, dialects are destined to disappear rapidly. However, if we observe dialects very carefully, we can find words in dialects that persistently survive. *Izui* in the Sendai dialect is symbolic of one of these words. *Izui* describes a feeling as if a foreign substance were to come into the eye, or an indefinable feeling of unpleasantness sensed by the surface of the body. This subtle meaning, which cannot be represented in common Japanese, is hidden in this word.

When we study ancient Japanese, we read classical literature such as *The Tale of Genji* or *The Pillow Book*. We use the literary language of the nobility, centered in Kyoto, from the Heian Period (794-1192) as materials. However, we must ask whether or not such materials reflect the entire scope of ancient Japanese.

Prof. Kobayashi aims to shed light on the history of Japanese through the study of dialects. His research covers a wide perspective, such as geography and social stature. By exploring dialects, Prof. Kobayashi is digging into the history of the Japanese vernacular, hidden from literature. Many ancient Japanese words have spread from the central region to the periphery and live on in local dialects. The mechanism by which words used in central Japan in the past have changed into local dialects is quite interesting. *Menkoi* (lovely) of the Sendai dialect, for example, originated from the word *megushi*, which appears in the *Manyoshu* (the oldest Japanese poetry anthology). The word has changed forms to *megoshi*, *me Goi*, and eventually *menkoi*. In this way, a word which has vanished from the central region now exists in a new form in the Tohoku region. Even the meaning of the word has changed uniquely in the region.

It is obvious that dialects are a cultural heritage. Not much time remains to record dialects to be passed down to future generations. Prof. Kobayashi has surveyed 2,000 locations across the country and will be traveling in the Tohoku region together with students later this year to conduct a dialect survey.

"While many dialects are disappearing, such words associated with emotions or feelings are more likely to survive. *Izui* is representative of such cases," said Prof. Kobayashi.



The Japanese Linguistics Laboratory of Tohoku University has conducted field research since 1955, together with students. They are centered on descriptive research of basic fields of language, such as phonology, accents, grammar, and vocabulary, and also cover studies of dialect geography and social dialectology.

"Sendai dialect *karuta*" (Japanese playing cards) manufactured under the supervision of Prof. Kobayashi.



Dialect postcards presented to the participants of dialect surveys. The surveys, conducted at 2,000 locations across the country, have already collected more than 400 items of data. From these items, postcards such as *karada* (body), *obake* (ghost), and *kanemochi* (rich person) were created.

<http://www.sal.tohoku.ac.jp/hougen/>