

Is ainu similar to japanese in terms of structure and or phonology?

[Sociology](#), [Communication](#)



Located at the northernmost portion of Japan and almost proxemic to Russia, the island of Hokkaido is home to a Japanese ethnic minority called the Ainu. Currently, although the Ainu is a distinguished ethnicity, they are generally considered Japanese. Historically, Hokkaido was Ainu territory until Japan became a full jurisdiction of Japan in 1879 (Sugimoto, 61).

Prior to the establishment of a Japanese government in Hokkaido and even some years after the regime, the Ainu maintained a lifestyle that was distinctively their own; even over the new century, there have had problems in terms of the recognition of the Ainu as indigenous peoples instead of Japanese.

Culturally, the Ainu culture is different from Japan although due to the diminishment of the population of the decades, in addition to the assimilation of the Ainu descents to the Japanese culture, at some point the Ainu seems to be in threat in terms of maintaining its own identity (Sugimoto).

An apparent distinctive cultural element of the Ainu is their language; all in all, when it comes to examining the Ainu language, it is categorized as genetically language-isolate (Shibatani, 5). Although studies on the Ainu language have demonstrated discussions as to which language it would be considered to have a close proximity, interestingly, its similarities with the Japanese language is minimal.

This is an interesting point given that even though Hokkaido is an island north of Japan, the Ainu's lingual relationship with the societies that surround

it --- Japan, Korea, Russia --- have been found to be still distinguishingly distant.

A Background on the Ainu

In tracing the Ainu of Japan, this group's roots have not been fully determined mainly because of their distant relationship from the peoples of its geographic proximity. It was found, however, that based on genetic testings the Ainu had relations with the groups from Tibet and in the Andaman Islands in the Indian Ocean.

Another theory was based on tests that showed genetic similarities with those from Mongolia and the Russian Far East. This can be attributed to the geographical history in which the Japanese archipelago was once a part of the Asiatic mainland (Levin & Michael).

Culture-wise the indigenous Ainu was also different from the Japanese; in a sense, even prior to the establishment of the Japanese regime in the 1870s, much of the Ainu's interaction were among the indigenous populations from Sakhalin and the Kurile island were found to be more evident (Sugimoto).

Given the geographical roots of the Ainu and the location of Hokkaido, the Ainu's way of life demonstrated hunting, fishing, and gathering activities, in addition to seasonal lifestyles reflective of surviving the winter months.

In terms of its religion and beliefs, the Ainu is also different from the Japanese; hence, culturally, even these two have little or nothing in common. This therefore further supports the theories that the Ainu language is essentially different from the Japanese.

A Discussion on the Ainu Language

The Ainu language is not only exclusive in the island of Hokkaido where the Ainu people are more known to be found; in fact, the Ainu was also distributed in certain parts of Japan such as in Northern Honshu, parts of Sakhalin and Kurile Islands. The language was therefore spoken in these parts of the country but it remained contained among the Ainu communities.

The Ainu language is identified to also have its dialects: the Ainu-Hokkaido, Ainu-Sakhalin and the Ainu-Kurile. From these dialects were distinctions were also identified, particular through the differences in the phonology lexicon.

However, there was also the noted degree of variation in terms of the similarities and differences among these dialects. For instance, according to Shibatani (7), there is a great difference between the Ainu language in Hokkaido and in Sakhalin and in the syllable structures such as CV and CVC in Hokkaido Ainu whereas in Sakhalin the syllable structures are CVC, CV, CVV (long vowel) (Shibatani, 8).

Another important feature in the Ainu language is in its phonology; as Shibatani (12-13) mentioned, the language avoids the the use of vowel sequences, hence, the tendency is that the second vowels are usually devocalized.

Comparing Ainu Language with the Japanese Language

Generally, a comparison between the Ainu language and Japanese is explained by Shibatani as follows (xiv):

" There is no strong evidence suggesting that a genetic relationship between Ainu and Japanese, and structurally the two differ significantly. Ainu, especially classic Ainu, is a polysynthetic language involving incorporated nouns, incorporated adverbs, affixal forms of reflexive and reciprocal morphemes, as well as personal affixes agreeing with subject and object.

Japanese also shows a high degree of synthesis in its verbal morphology, but involving neither personal affixes or noun incorporation of the Ainu type, it shows a qualitative difference from the Ainu structure."

As previously mentioned, the Ainu language is classified as language-isolate; this means that the language does not have a traceable association or relation with any other language. Many studies in the past have attempted to identify the closest relative of the Ainu language, but mostly, the Ainu has remained unique.

Since that the language was spoken only among the Ainu and that the next generation Ainus were no longer educated with the language because of the discrimination they experienced in Japan, the Ainu language can be considered to be threatened to near-extinction.

In fact, there are only a certain number of individuals who are noted to speak the language, although given the fact that the Ainu culture was just recently acknowledged by the Japanese Parliament as a distinct indigenous culture, the interest in the culture and in the language have been on the rise for the purpose of reviving it (Akulov).