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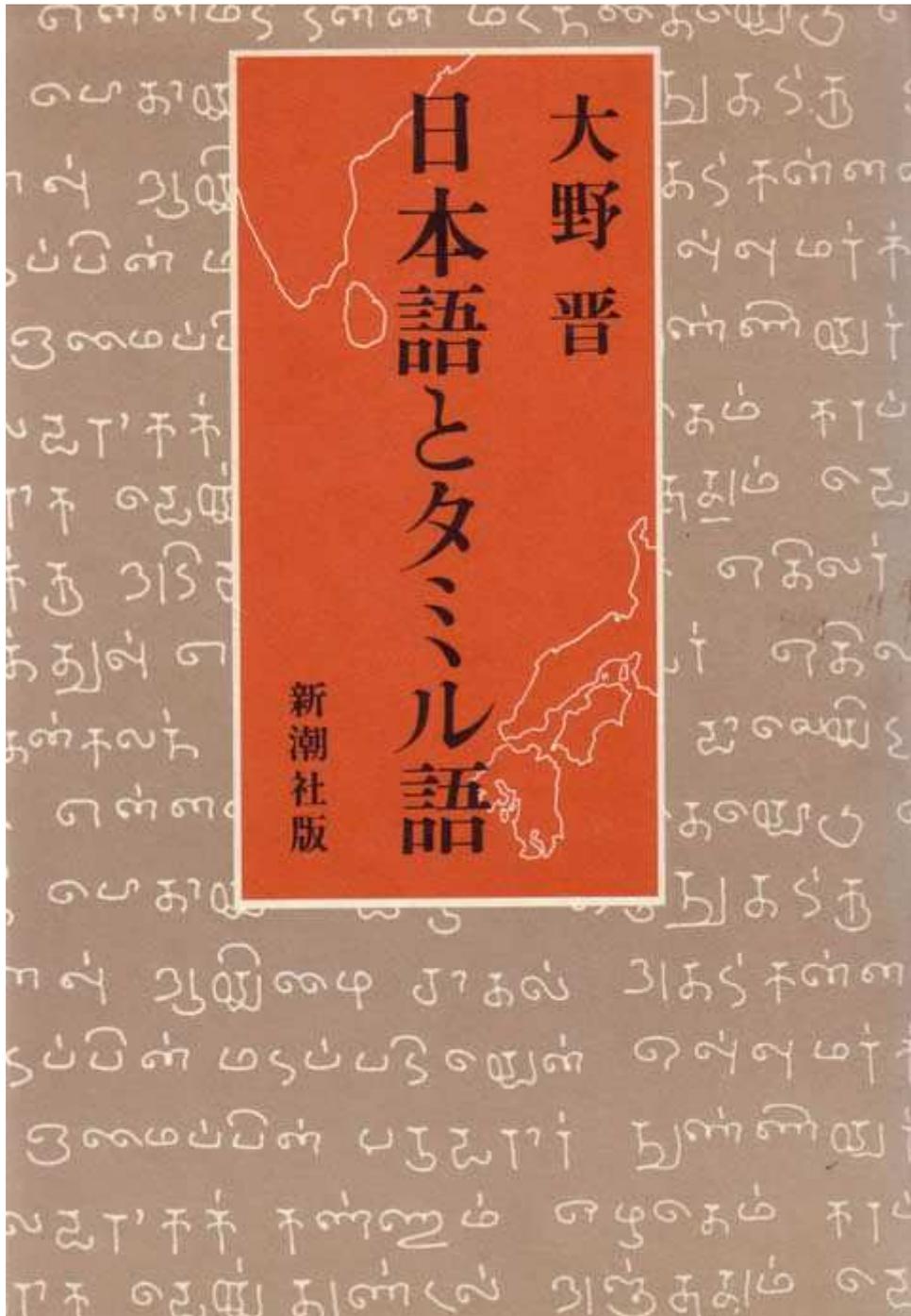
# Professor Susumu Ohno (1919-2008), Japanese Linguist

An appreciation

by Sachi Sri Kantha, September 2, 2008

The Susumu Ohno hypothesis on the origin of Japanese language from proto-Dravidian (Tamil) has been critiqued strongly by other Japanese linguists (both, native variety and non-native variety). But Prof. Ohno is neither a listless crank nor a linguist-impostor. His credentials as one of the ranking Japanese linguists of his generation makes it difficult to discard his Japanese-Tamil language links as fluffy and lacking merit.

Renowned Japanese linguist Professor Susumu Ohno was born on August 23, 1919. He lived for 88 years and passed away on July 14 this year. He should not be confused with his namesake - another internationally known Susumu Ohno (1928-2000), an influential clinical geneticist and evolutionary biologist.



Susumu Ohno, the linguist, derived recognition, notoriety and some derision (among some academic circles) for his provocative hypothesis of tracing the affinity of the Japanese language to the Tamil language. Prof. Ohno introduced this hypothesis at a plenary lecture he delivered on January 5th 1981 at the 5th International Conference Seminar of Tamil Studies (Madurai, India). I was fortunate to be an eye-witness to this plenary lecture, which at that moment infused a breeze of fresh air to the staid theme of Tamil linguistic relationships. To be frank, Prof. Ohno's presentation in English on that day lacked the eloquent display of English oratory for which Tamils have been attuned. He didn't need it though, since his main message contained the mesmerizing quality on its own. Until 1981, (in directional context) the origin, the heritage and the influence of Tamil language from central Tamil Nadu had been explored in relation to the North, West, South and Southeast regions of Asia. Prof. Ohno, in soft tones, woke up the Tamils with his message, 'Haven't you ignored the path Tamil language traversed in the East direction towards Japan?'

By 1981, Prof. Ohno had gained recognition as one of the foremost Japanese linguists in Japan. His academic profile, up to 1981, has been summarized as follows, in one of the books (*Worldview and Rituals among Japanese and Tamils*, Gakushuin University, 1985) he co-authored with Prof. A. Sanmugadas and Manonmani Sanmugadas:

Born in 1919, graduated from the University of Tokyo in 1943. Professor of Japanese Linguistics at Gakushuin University. He had co-edited the oldest extant Japanese poetry anthology *The Manyoshu* (Iwanami Shoten, 1957-62), the second oldest extant compilation of Japanese history, *The Nihonshoki* (Iwanami Shoten, 1965-67) and *Iwanami Kogojiten/Iwanami Dictionary of Early Japanese* (Iwanami Shoten, 1974). Other books and articles he has published include:

'A comparative study of the Japanese and Korean Languages', *Kokugo to Kokubungaku* No.5 (Shibundo, 1952).

*The Origin of the Japanese Language* (Iwanami Shoten, 1957)

*The Birth of the Japanese Language* (Chuokoron-sha, 1980)

'Tamil and Japanese; a comparative study', *Gengo* (Taishukan, Jan-Sept. 1980)

*Sound Correspondences between Tamil and Japanese* (Gakushuin University, 1980).

In the Preface to his 1985 co-authored book, Prof. Ohno described briefly how his interests in the linguistic relationship between Japanese and Tamil languages came to be developed. To quote,

"Looking back on the progress of my study of the Japanese-Tamil relationship, it all started when I went to Madras for the first time, during the Spring of 1980, carrying a list of words that I thought corresponded between Japanese and Tamil. Professor Pon Kotandaraman of the University of Madras read my list with much interest. During the autumn of that year, I traveled around Madras, Tanjavur, Tirucciraappalli and Madurai with a crew of NHK (Broadcasting Corporation of Japan) and observed the real conditions of life and beliefs of the indigenous people. I read a paper on 'The relationship of the Tamil and Japanese languages' at the Fifth International Conference Seminar of Tamil Studies held in Madurai in January 1981. I published my study in the form of a book, *Sound Correspondences between Tamil and Japanese*, with the financial support of Gakushuin University. I went again to Madras and studied Tamil with Kotandaraman from autumn 1981 to summer 1982. He treated me with much kindness and taught me some classical Tamil texts.

In spring 1983, Sanmugadas came to Japan as a Research Fellow of the Japan Foundation, along with his wife, to work on the Japanese-Tamil relationship with me. They had heard my paper at the International Tamil Conference held in Madurai in 1981, studied the list of words presented on that occasion, and became interested in the project.

Professor Pon Kothandaraman and Professor D.J. Vacek, of Charles University, examined all the words presented in the list that I submitted to the Conference and advised me to omit certain words. I went to the University of California at Berkeley where Professor Masao Miyoshi introduced me to Professor M.B. Emeneau. Professor Emeneau went through my list and encouraged me to proceed with the study. Professor Kamil V. Zvelebil, University of Utrecht, showed interest in my book and wrote a letter to me when I was in Madras. He came to Japan in 1983 and we met. After reading my two papers and *Sound Correspondences between Tamil and Japanese*, he wrote a paper, 'Tamil and Japanese - Are They Related? The hypothesis of Susumu Ohno' in the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* (University of London, vol. 48, part 1, 1985).

But for encouragement and friendly advice given by these eminent Dravidianists, this investigation could not have proceeded up to this point. I am indebted to them and I would like to express my gratitude for their help and encouragement."

In the 1981 plenary lecture he delivered at Madurai International Tamil Conference, Prof. Ohno observed the following:

"There is a strong probability for the existence of a relationship between Tamil and Japanese. In order to prove this, it is necessary to present a long list of corresponding words strictly supported by sound laws to clarify grammatical similarities between both languages to prove suffixal correspondences in the structure of words and to prove morphological correspondences.

As for problems in grammatical structure, the Japanese language is an agglutinative language, as is the Tamil language. In Japanese, the adjective comes before the noun and the adverb before the verb. The object also comes before the verb. Japanese use

post-positions and auxiliary verbs. The Japanese nouns, adjectives and verbs have no plural declension. The demonstrative pronouns have the distinction of 'near', 'intermediate' and 'far' (proximity, mediality and remoteness like the Latin *hic iste ille*). There is no personal conjugation in the verb which exists in the Tamil language; and this is one of the main differences between Tamil and Japanese. There are several more points to be compared grammatically between these languages, but I should like to hold off these points till I have made progress in the study of classical Tamil.

This time I shall deal only with word correspondences. My source for the Tamil words is Burrow and Emeneau's *A Dravidian Etymological Dictionary*. I have tried to confirm the meanings of the words which I picked up from this dictionary with the help of a few informants in Tamil Nadu. I have taken up a total of 500 words whose correspondences with Japanese words seem to be supported by sound laws. The informants understood 70% of the 500 Tamil words in total and explained the meanings to me. Some of the informants replied, 'Roughly half the words asked are not in common use. We remember having read such words in books.' As for the corresponding Japanese words, I have used all materials available from Old Japanese to the present day dialect..."

The Susumu Ohno hypothesis on the origin of Japanese language from proto-Dravidian (Tamil) has been critiqued strongly by other Japanese linguists (both, native variety and non-native variety). But Prof. Ohno is neither a listless crank nor a linguist-impostor. His credentials as one of the ranking Japanese linguists of his generation makes it difficult to discard his Japanese-Tamil language links as fluffy and lacking merit. Commenting about his critics, Prof. Ohno had noted, "I was frankly astonished by much of the hubbub at that time, for I realized that my critics were for the most part neither scholars of old Japanese nor of Tamil. As they are unfamiliar with the ancient literature, they could not comprehend the forms and meanings of the words I was citing. At the time, no university in the country was actively studying the possibility of a Tamil-Japanese connection, but as a result of my probing the issue, the University of Tokyo as well as Gakushuin University where I teach, opened up an inquiry into the matter. There was suddenly a surge of media coverage of the subject, and I found myself, although at the beginning of my research, in the center of a nationwide debate.

Furthermore, the *Japan Times* newspaper obituary (July 15, 2008) of Prof. Ohno recorded that, "In 1999, he wrote *Nihongo Renshucho* (Japanese-language practice), which initiated the general public on the depths and intricacies of Japanese. It became a publishing phenomenon, selling nearly 2 million copies." As such, natives of Tamil language are, in turn, indebted to Prof. Ohno for opening a research path in comparative linguistics that has remained unexplored until his pioneering efforts. He will be remembered in the years to come, for his novel and invigorating academic insights linking the Japanese and Tamil languages.

### Sources

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