

FIRST DIALECTOLOGISTS



At a party with his students in 1996

Takesi SIBATA (1918-2007)

«For me, dialects are not the written language but the language I hear in the locality. In addition, it is not the language of the elite but the language of the ordinary people. To research this issue, I did extensive fieldwork in Japan from 1949 to around 1980. Meanwhile, I realized that dialects are the language of humans taking root on the Earth. They actually differ from person to person rather than from region to region.»

«I have studied dialects as an object of linguistics as a science.»

(Hogen-ron (Studies on Dialects), 1988, 1)



- Takesi Sibata: A Japanese Linguist, “the Father of Japanese Sociolinguistics”¹

Takesi Sibata is a Japanese linguist who was the founder and promoter of Japanese sociolinguistics. He established it out of his original thinking, inspired by linguistic contexts in Japan. His encounter with Willem A. Grootaers led to the emergence and growth of modern linguistic geography in Japan.²



- Abridged Biography

1918: Born in Nagoya, Japan.

1935: Entered the Eighth High School and became involved in the Romanization movement.

1938: Entered the Department of Linguistics at Tokyo Imperial University and studied under Shirô Hattori and Shinkichi Hashimoto.

1942: Graduated from Tokyo Imperial University.

1945: Assistant at Tokyo Imperial University.

1948: Took charge of the Literacy Survey.

1949: Researcher at the newly-established National Language Research Institute.

1957: Started the survey for *Linguistic Atlas of Japan* (LAJ) and *Linguistic Atlas of Itoigawa* (LAI).

1964: Professor at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies (until 1968).

1968: Professor at the University of Tokyo (until 1979).

1979: Professor at Saitama University (until 1984).



¹ Dr. Sibata is described as this in Fumio Inoue and Daniel Long (1998), in which can be found a detailed introduction to his achievements in Japanese sociolinguistics. Their article was invaluable to me in writing this article. Fumio Inoue and Daniel Long (1998) “Dr. Takesi Sibata and the principal trends in Japanese Sociolinguistics”, in Takesi Sibata (1998), *Sociolinguistics in Japanese Contexts*, Mouton de Gruyter, 7-16.

² Grootaers and Sibata co-operated to advance linguistic geography in Japan. See INOUE (2011) for details. Fumio INOUE (2011) “FIRST DIALECTOLOGISTS: Willem A. GROOTAERS (1911-1999)”, *Dialectologia* 7 (2011), 167-174 <<http://www.publicacions.ub.edu/revistes/dialectologia7/dialectologists.asp>>.

- *Main Works*

- 1951: NLRI (National Language Research Institute), *Gengo-seikatsu no jittai: shirakawa-shi oyobi fukin no noson niokeru (The Real State of Language Life: from the Language Survey in Shirakawa City)*, NLRI Report, Shuei Shuppan. [Co-authored]
- 1953: NLRI (National Language Research Institute), *Chiiki-shakai no gengo-seikatsu: tsuruoka niokeru jittai-chosa (Language Life in the Local Community: from the Linguistic Survey at Tsuruoka)*, NLRI Report, Shuei Shuppan. [Co-authored]
- 1958: SIBATA, Takesi, *Nihon no hogen (Dialects in Japan)*, Iwanami Shoten.
- 1965: NLRI (National Language Research Institute), *Kyotsugo-ka no katei (The Process of Standardization)*, NLRI Report, Shuei Shuppan. [Co-authored]
- 1969: SIBATA, Takesi, *Gengo-chirigaku no hoho (Methods in Linguistic Geography)*, Chikuma Shobo.
- 1977: SIBATA, Takesi et al., *Amami tokunoshima no kotoba: bumpu kara rekishi e (Language in Tokunoshima, Amami: from Distribution to History)*, Akiyama Shoten.
- 1978: The Dialectological Circle of Japan and Takesi SIBATA, *Nihon hogen no goi: shinzoku-meisho & sonota (Vocabulary in Japanese Dialects: Kinship Terms and Others)*, Sanseido.
- 1978: SIBATA, Takesi, *Hogen no sekai: kotoba no umareru tokoro (The World of Dialects: Where Language Is Born)*, Heibonsha.
- 1978: SIBATA, Takesi, *Shakai-gengogaku no kadai (Issues in Sociolinguistics)*, Sanseido. [Includes Sibata's bibliography.]
- 1984: SIBATA, Takesi (ed.), *Amami-oshima no kotoba: bumpu kara rekishi e (Language in Amami-Oshima: from Distribution to History)*, Akiyama Shoten.
- 1988: SIBATA, Takesi, *Goi-ron no hoho (Methods in Lexical Studies)*, Sanseido.
- 1988: SIBATA, Takesi, *Hogen-ron (Studies on Dialects)*, Heibonsha. [Includes Sibata's bibliography.]
- 1988, 1990, 1995: SIBATA, Takesi, *Itoigawa gengo-chizu (Linguistic Atlas of Itoigawa)*, 3 volumes, Akiyama Shoten.
- 1998: SIBATA, Takesi, *Sociolinguistics in Japanese Contexts*, edited by Tetsuya Kunihiro, Fumio Inoue & Daniel Long, Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gruyter. [Partly accessible through Google Books.]



- *The Study of Language Life: Foundation of Japanese Sociolinguistics*

Takesi Sibata (1988, 7) stated that we should not ignore our accumulated sociolinguistic surveys, taken after World War II. They were not conducted under the name of “sociolinguistics” or “sociology of language” but as the study of “*language life*.” According to him, the language of a local speech community was investigated to address the following issues peculiar to Japan: the contact between dialect and the common language, honorifics and their use, and the process of standardization in Hokkaido. The co-authored NLRI research reports shown above are examples of these. In the survey at Shirakawa in 1949, he selected informants using random sampling because he had a hypothesis that language differs from person to person. Also introduced was an innovative 24-hour survey methodology in which the language life of a person was recorded for the period of a whole day.



- *Thriving Linguistic Geography*

It is said that Takesi Sibata and Willem A. Grootaers met for the first time in 1951.³ There had been a tradition of linguistic geography starting at the beginning of the 20th century in Japan, but Willem A. Grootaers, a Belgian Catholic priest, introduced the methods of linguistic geography which had been used in Dutch dialectology. Some years later, in 1957, Takesi Sibata started the survey for the *Linguistic Atlas of Japan* (LAJ)⁴ as a project of NLRI and for the *Linguistic Atlas of Itoigawa* (LAI) with Willem A. Grootaers, Munemasa Tokugawa, and Yoshio Mase. The LAJ survey covered 2,400 localities all over Japan, while the LAI survey was an “all-hamlet” survey conducted in a small area on the prominent dialect border. The two contrasting surveys produced hundreds of linguistic maps, which contributed to a theoretical refining of the discipline. Sibata’s book, *Methods in Linguistic Geography* (1969), clearly proposed the aims, methods, and steps for analyzing geographical distributions of language. He declared

³ The year when they met for the first time is not known but estimated in Sawaki (2011). Motoei Sawaki (2011) “Nihongo-gakusha retsuden: gurootaasu (The Lives of Japanese Linguists: Grootaers)” *Nihongogaku (Japanese Linguistics)*, vol. 30 No. 13, Meiji Shoin, 74-84.

⁴ NLRI (National Language Research Institute) (1966-1974) *Linguistic Atlas of Japan*, vols. 1-6, Okurasho Insatsukyoku.

(1969, 11): “Linguistic geography is a method in historical linguistics; therefore, the aim of linguistic geography is to reveal the history of language.” Sibata deduced language change over time in the surveyed area based on the geographical distributions of word forms. Thus he drew maps in a way that reflected his interpretation of distributions. The survey in Itoigawa also brought forth new research methodologies such as the “all-inhabitant” blanket survey in a particular hamlet or a “glottogram,” which is a graph which crosses speakers’ ages with geographical factors. In the 1970s and 1980s after LAJ was published, many geolinguistic surveys were conducted, in which Takesi Sibata did his part by giving lectures on linguistic geography at universities around Japan.



- Transition to Sociolinguistics

In 1978, Sibata published his book on sociolinguistics, an anthology of his papers since the 1950s, which were instrumental in the development of Japanese sociolinguistics in the 1980s and later. The decline of local dialects and the mobility of people underlay this trend, but Sibata had been constantly aware of “linguistics of *la parole*.” Due to his experiences of dialect research in speech communities, he focused on the idiolect and extended this to the language of the community. The book included papers on language life, honorifics, language change, group language (sociolect), norms of language, and reform of orthography. Two of the papers in the book were the results of geolinguistic surveys, which was an important part of his approach to sociolinguistics. In his writing, he suggested that the use of minority languages in Japan ought to be studied, and such surveys have been launched only recently.



- The Literacy Survey and Romanization

Takesi Sibata was involved in the Literacy Survey, which had been planned under the American occupation. The GHQ (General Headquarters) had devised a plan of abolishing Chinese characters and Romanizing the Japanese language. However, the survey proved that the literacy rate of the Japanese people was quite high. There was a

memorable episode. Sibata was unshakeable in his opposition to GHQ's Romanization plan despite the fact that he was a stalwart advocate of Romanization. He thwarted the GHQ's aim by resisting their attempt to falsify survey results.



- *The “Scientific” Method and the “Humanistic” Method*

Sibata was a strong proponent of the “scientific” method. He posed hypotheses and verified them by using clear logic. Thus, his belief was that scientific study must be precise and objective for others to test its conclusions. This is also why he believed in statistical methods. He was already familiar with statistics through the analysis of the Literacy Survey. Later in the development of linguistic geography, he used a computer not only to draw linguistic maps but also to obtain mathematical calculations of locality networks.⁵ In this way, he was always a leader at the forefront of new approaches.

However logical his writing was, Sibata's method was decidedly humanistic. Folk etymology was important for him because it could be the starting point of language change. At the end of his book (1969: 195), he stated that the discipline of linguistic geography would be at the heart of “linguistic humanics.” He wanted to study human nature through the study of dialects.



- *A Mentor and Educator of Linguistics*

At universities where he worked, Sibata educated and trained students, who eventually became scholars actively working in the field of sociolinguistics or dialectology. When he was at the University of Tokyo, he started to do a linguistic survey every year as part of his effort to induct students into this field. He closely guided them but also trusted young researchers or graduate students with its organization. During the survey and the analysis, he helped students as a mentor but also worked on the task providing a model as to how to conduct the research.

⁵ The linguistic maps of the *Linguistic Atlas of Itoigawa* (1988, 1990, 1995) were computer-produced and the whole data was made into a database. Also, the network method to divide dialect areas was developed by Yasuo Kumagai under his guidance. Sibata, Takeshi/ Kumagai, Yasuo (1985) “Gengoteki tokuchoo niyoru chiiki bunkatsu no tame no Netowaakuhoo” (The Network Method: a Method for Dividing an Area on the Basis of Linguistic Features), *Kokugogaku* 140, 73-88.

Sibata wrote books and articles for the general public and appeared on TV often to introduce what the study of language and dialect is. He edited a dictionary of Japanese language and a dictionary of synonyms. As it were, he was educating people, but he was not intrusive. Rather, he wanted to disseminate how interesting language is. When he interviewed informants, he always came across as gentle and calm. That shows that he respected people and their speech—dialect.

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* See the list below for an overview of the trends of Japanese dialectology which Sibata actively worked for.

List of English titles of papers presented at conferences of the Dialectological Circle of Japan (1965- present)

http://dialectology-jp.org/wiki.cgi?page=Conference_Papers