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SORBIAN STUDIES IN JAPAN: TRENDS AND PERSPECTIVES¹

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to describe how Sorbian studies (Sorabistics) have emerged and evolved in Japan. Situated far away from Lusatia, the homeland of the Sorbs, and not a Slavonic country, Japan seems an unlikely place to show interest in the Sorbs. Nonetheless, a list of Japanese language articles and books dedicated entirely or partly to discussion of the Sorbs comprises more than 100 titles,² and the number is steadily increasing. This suggests that there is considerable interest in this ‘smallest Slavonic nation’ [Stone 1972] in the Far East.

After a brief overview of some trends in Japanese academia with regard to Sorbian studies, we will take a closer look at linguistics, where an especially intense engagement with the Sorbian language has emerged over the last two decades.

2. Academic interest in the Sorbs in Japan

Sorbs are mainly mentioned in Japan in three contexts. First, in the context of Slavistics, the Sorbs are discussed as one of the Slavonic peoples. In Japanese academia, knowledge about the Sorbs is, of course, disseminated most often among Slavists. On the other hand, though, it seems that most Slavists have not engaged in Sorbian studies. The Sorbs are usually mentioned just briefly and not given deeper consideration. A distinguished exception is Mitani Keiko, whose work is presented in the next section.

Second, it seems that, curiously, more researchers who have published on the Sorbs can be found among Japanese Germanists. To give an example of this trend in the literature, *Higashidoitsu bungaku*, a journal on Eastern German literature, has, since 1998, repeatedly published materials related to the Sorbs. Such materials include *Die schwarze Mühle* [The

¹ This is a revised and actualized version of Kimura and Sasahara [2009] and Sasahara and Kimura [2010]. Japanese personal names are given in the standard Japanese order with the family name first.

² An actual list can be found at <http://serbja.web.fc2.com/bibliografija.html>.

Black Mill], a novel by Jurij Brězan (Jurij Bresan, 1916–2006), one of the most famous contemporary Sorbian writers, translated by Ikeda Toshinori [Bresan 1998], and Sorbian folk tales collected by Pawoł Nedo (Paul Nedo, 1908–1984), translated by Oono Hisako [Nedo 1998, 2004, 2010, 2011]. Additionally, several linguists with Germanist backgrounds have engaged in the study of the Sorbian language. We consider linguistics in greater depth in the next chapter.

Third, there has been some interest in the Sorbs as an ethnic (national) minority in Europe. Again, it is striking that researchers often approach the Sorbs as part of German society rather than in a Slavonic context. For example, Okada Toshiyuki [1999, 2000] has explored legal protections of the Sorbs in relation to German law, and Nakamura Kouhei [1997] has illuminated some aspects of Sorbian history as cases of resistance against Nazi Germany, presenting as an example Alojs Andricki (Alojs Andritzki, 1914–1943), a Catholic priest who died in Camp Dachau.

This short overview indicates that, while the Sorbs have attracted Japanese scholars, most Japanese studies on the Sorbs have used either German or Slavonic language sources other than Sorbian. Studies that additionally or primarily use the Sorbian language are confined to linguistics, which will be the topic of the next section.

3. Linguistic works on the Sorbian language

In the following, milestone works on the Sorbian language by Japanese linguists are briefly presented, namely, Izui [1968], Mitani [2006], and Sasahara [2010] from general and descriptive linguistics and Kimura [2005a] from sociolinguistics.

3.1. Izui [1968]: The first paper using Sorbian data

Izui Hisanosuke (1905–1983) was a professor at the University of Kyoto who studied general linguistics. His interests were above all the languages of Europe, but he also wrote many articles on Asian and Oceanic languages.

Izui's work titled 'Shimo-serubia-go SE BŁYSKA; Doitsu-go UNTER' [Lower Sorbian SE BŁYSKA; German UNTER] (1968) and written in Japanese is essentially his research note on Hermann Paul's *Prinzipien der Spachgeschichte* in the context of general linguistics. The work was epoch-making for linguists in Japan in that it made them aware of the existence of the (Lower) Sorbian language. According to Izui, Paul describes the phrase *se blyska* [it lightens] from *Nieder-serbisch* as an instance of impersonal expressions analogous to the French term *il gèle* [it freezes]. Izui insists that Paul's title for the language, *Nieder-serbisch*, is incorrect and he should have instead named it *Nieder-lausitzisch*, i.e. Lower Sorbian. Izui supports this claim with Lower Sorbian paradigms for personal pronouns and some language examples.

Izui's above-mentioned assertion is, perhaps, trivial, but he uses actual data from the Lower Sorbian language to defend his position. The importance of his work lies in the fact that it could be the first article published in Japan (and in Japanese), at least in a general linguistics context, in which materials from the Lower Sorbian language appear. It seems,

however, that further papers centred on the Sorbian language in linguistics did not appear in Japan for several decades following this work by Izui.

3.2. Mitani [2003]: a Sorbian–Japanese dictionary

Mitani Keiko, a Slavist who has mainly researched Southern Slavonic languages, began to fill this dearth in the literature [e.g. Mitani 1997]. She became intensively engaged with the Sorbian languages and culture in the 1990s. Her research aim is to investigate the Sorbian languages from the wider perspective of Slavonic linguistics. Her works on Sorbian range from addressing the grammar of the Sorbian languages [e.g. Mitani 2000, 2004] to the actual situation of the WITAJ project ([e.g. Mitani 2001, 2009]. In 1993, she wrote a research note, ‘Sorubugo ni tsuite’ [On the Sorbian language] [Mitani 1993], which is an annotated translation of Faßke [1991] by which Sorbian was introduced in the Japanese language to Japanese Slavists for the first time.

Through vigorous work, she published the first Upper Sorbian–Japanese dictionary [Mitani 2003]. She compiled this dictionary based on the extant Upper Sorbian–German dictionary (SHN) and Upper Sorbian–Russian dictionary (HRS). Her dictionary contains almost all entries from the former and entries added from the latter to supplement those of SHN. One special merit of this dictionary is the appendix, which consists of about 80 pages devoted to explaining the Sorbs and Sorbian grammar (phonetics/phonology, morphology, and syntax). A copy of this dictionary can be seen in the Sorbian Central Library at the Sorbian Institute and another in the Sorbian Museum, both in Budyšin (Bautzen).

3.3. Sasahara [2010]: a textbook introducing Sorbian

Some years after Mitani’s initial research, in 1999, Sasahara Ken, who started as a Germanist [e.g. Sasahara 1999], began to study the Sorbian language. His main interest is describing the language’s grammar based on his own fieldwork. In 2006, he wrote in Japanese a 33-page grammar sketch of Upper Sorbian, which uses the phonological system instead of orthography [Sasahara 2006b].

Besides several earlier works mainly describing reflexive verbs and voice [e.g. Sasahara 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2006a], he wrote a textbook chapter on ‘exotic’ languages in Europe [Machida 2010], which was the first practical textbook for teaching Upper Sorbian in Japan. The book contains nine languages, each otherwise unlikely to be introduced in Japan (Abkhazian, Estonian, Sorbian, Frisian, Luxembourgish, Provençal (Occitan), Basque, Faroese, and Romani). The chapter on Sorbian includes introductory notes (on the speakers, the cultural background, letters, pronunciation, and other aspects), a three-lesson text with a glossary and grammatical descriptions, and short essays. The grammar sections addresses present indicative verbs, inflection of nouns and adjectives, present perfect tense, and other such topics necessary to understanding the basic constructions of the language. Each text has audio material narrated on CD by native speakers. Kimura [2011] reviewed the chapter.

3.4. Kimura [2005a]: a description of the sociolinguistic situation

Sociolinguistic research is the field of Kimura Goro Christoph, a researcher of language revitalization and language rights [e.g. Kimura 2003, 2010]. After pursuing German studies and sociolinguistics, he began conducting fieldwork on Sorbian, mainly in the context of Catholic parishes in the Southwest of the Sorbian language area, the only region where Sorbian is spoken on a daily basis by members of all generations. Kimura's study [2005a], based on his PhD thesis, analyses the language usage and accompanying language ideologies of this region. This book, which seeks to understand language maintenance as a process (see also Kimura, in press), consists of four parts. In part one, the author discusses the key concepts of the study: 'language ideology' and 'accumulation'. In part two, he examines the effectiveness of these concepts through a pilot study on Cornish, a Celtic language from the Southwest of Great Britain. Then, in part three, the main section of the book, he applies his framework to Upper Sorbian, in order to highlight how the language has been socially constructed by its users in daily life. In part four, he clarifies the interrelationships between language ideology and accumulation, with the aim of presenting a theoretical framework to understand how a society constructs language.

More recently, Kimura has focused on the relationship between bilingual Sorbian-German speakers ('Sorbs') and the usually monolingual German speakers ('Germans'), analysing discussions of the use of Sorbian in the public sphere, which emerged following a de facto 'prohibition' of the Sorbian language in a workplace in the Sorbian core region [e.g. Kimura 2007, 2011].

4. Prospects and challenges

The concise presentation of linguistic research has confirmed the tendency for Sorbian studies in Japan to be predominated by researchers who began their scholarship in German studies in a broad sense; that is, Sorbian studies in Japan do not always develop as a branch of Slavistics. This trend, which might be peculiar to the Japanese research landscape, has recently become even stronger with new researchers coming from German to Sorbian studies. This may seem strange to Sorabists in Europe. However, it seems reasonable from the Japanese perspective that Sorbian studies would occur in relation to German studies, because the Sorbs dwell in Germany. The reason behind this stance could be that Germany has been an important country for Japan and that the number of researchers on German language and literature is traditionally relatively high in Japan, and indeed much higher than that of Slavists.

On the other hand, of course, the Sorbs are Slavonic people, which is why Japanese Slavists also engage in Sorbian studies. A joint approach from the German and Slavistic viewpoints would certainly enrich Sorbian studies in Japan.

Before finishing this paper, we would like to suggest four tasks for Japanese Sorabists to pursue. The first is to continue original research. Japanese scholars have other academic and cultural backgrounds and ways of thinking that are different from those in Europe, which might lead them to new ways of observing the objects. Second, the output from Japan should be made accessible for international scholars as well. The list of works on

Sorbs by Japanese researchers written in languages other than Japanese (see appendix) should be extended in the future. Besides academic output, it is also important to create a bridge between Japanese and Sorbian people. Thus, the third task is to provide information about the Sorbs to Japanese society. The recently renewed website ‘Shin Sorubu tsuushin’ [New information on the Sorbs] (see also note 1) could include more content. There are also many other opportunities for introducing Sorbs in Japan – as part of regional and cultural studies in a course of German language education [e.g. Kimura 2004], as part of Slavonic studies [e.g. Sasahara and Kimura, forthcoming], and as a model case in minority studies [e.g. Kimura 2007]. Finally yet importantly, the importance of presenting Japan to Sorbs in a Sorbian language should not be overlooked. A good precedent is the joint contribution by Japanese scholars to the annual book *Serbska protyka 2006* [Mitani 2005, Kimura 2005b, Sasahara 2005]. Efforts in both these directions should continue.

Sorbian studies in Japan are still at an early stage, both in terms of the linguistic/cultural and the social aspects. However, we could recognize that the issue has shown considerable progress over the years. The authors wish that Sorbian studies will be deepened in Japan so that Japanese Sorabists increasingly contribute to related academic and social areas, domestically and internationally.

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Appendix:

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Sorbian studies in Japan: trends and perspectives

Summary

How does it come that Japanese scholars get interested in Sorbian studies? In this paper we review how Sorbian studies emerged and evolved in Japan, centering on the humanities – especially on linguistics and literature studies. Of course, motivations to work on Sorbian studies vary from scholar to scholar. But characteristic of the situation in Japan is that along with interested Slavists, not a few Japanese researchers on Sorbian studies have begun their study with a German studies background. This fact suggests that a joint approach from the German and Slavistic viewpoints may enrich Sorbian studies in Japan. At the end of this paper, the actual list of works on Sorbian themes by Japanese researchers written in languages other than Japanese is added as an appendix.

Keywords: Sorbian studies, German studies, area studies, Japan