

“Uvod u znanost o japanskom jeziku: Osnovna obilježja, glasovni sustav i leksički slojevi”: Book Review

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Abstract

“Uvod u znanost o japanskom jeziku: Osnovna obilježja, glasovni sustav i leksički slojevi” is a groundbreaking work on Japanese linguistics written in Croatian language. The book’s primary contribution lies in its methodical exploration of diverse facets of the Japanese language and the accomplishments of linguistic research related to it, all while considering the perspective of Croatian and other Slavic languages. By delving into the language’s structure, grammar, and unique characteristics from a Japanese perspective, this monograph enriches the reader’s comprehension of the Japanese language. As a valuable resource, it caters to both Croatian-speaking Japanese language students and those interested in general linguistics. The book comprises four informative chapters, along with an appendix that covers fundamental aspects of the Japanese writing system.

Keywords: Japanese linguistics, monograph, Croatian language

Povzetek

“Uvod u znanost o japanskom jeziku: Osnovna obilježja, glasovni sustav i leksički slojevi” predstavlja je pionirsko delo na področju japonskega jezikoslovja, napisano v hrvaškem jeziku. Glavni prispevek knjige leži v sistematičnem raziskovanju različnih vidikov japonskega jezika in dosežkov jezikoslovnih raziskav v zvezi z njim, ob upoštevanju perspektive hrvaškega in drugih slovanskih jezikov. Z raziskovanjem strukture jezika, slovnice in edinstvenih značilnosti iz japonskega vidika, ta monografija bogati bralčevo razumevanje japonskega jezika. Kot dragocen vir je knjiga namenjena hrvaškim študentom japonskega jezika in vsem, ki jih zanima splošna jezikoslovna tematika. Knjiga obsega štiri informativna poglavja in prilogo, ki obravnava osnovne vidike japonskega pisnega sistema.

Ključne besede: japonsko jezikoslovje, monografija, hrvaški jezik



1 Introduction

The book “Uvod u znanost o japanskom jeziku: Osnovna obilježja, glasovni sustav i leksički slojevi” marks a significant milestone in the field of Japanology, as it is the first scientific monograph written in Croatian, catering to the study of not only Japanese but also closely related South Slavic languages. This long-awaited work presents a comprehensive and lucid systematization of knowledge, combining both descriptive and theoretical perspectives.

The monograph is organized into four chapters and an appendix, covering the following:

Chapter 1 is an introduction to language study and the Japanese language. It offers an insightful overview of linguistic approaches and fundamental information about the Japanese language, its speakers, typological classification, and historical development.

Chapter 2 explains basic characteristics of the Japanese language. With it, readers gain a clear and informative understanding of the distinctive features of the Japanese language, setting it apart from Slavic and Indo-European languages. Topics discussed include its agglutinative nature, the role of auxiliary particles, word order peculiarities, ellipsis, adversative passives, as well as the complexities of politeness and formality, which impact both morphosyntax and pragmatics.

Chapter 3 is a part dedicated to phonetics and phonology of the Japanese language. It serves as an introductory guide to the sounds of language and covers essential concepts like phonemes, allophones, and phonotactic constraints. Through a contrastive approach, it highlights the similarities between Japanese and Croatian regarding phonemes. Additionally, prosodic units like mora and syllable are explored, and the accentual system is outlined with illustrative examples.

Chapter 4 deals with the Japanese lexicon. It provides valuable insights into recent scientific discoveries by delving into the lexical layers of the Japanese language, namely native Japanese vocabulary, Sino-Japanese vocabulary, loanwords, and mimetic expressions separately. It also presents significant information about word formation processes in Japanese.

Last but not least, the appendix supplements the monograph by describing the principles underlying the Japanese writing system, known for its intricacy. It includes a table with the Japanese phonetic script hiragana, along with two Latin transcriptions based on different principles, while also detailing the conventions of Latin transcription that reflect the structure of the Japanese sound system.

The above-mentioned chapters will be discussed in detail below.

2 Chapter 1: “Uvod u znanost o jezicima i japanskom jeziku”

A human language is a complex and intricate system of communication that is unique to humans, setting us apart from other species. It encompasses the use of sounds, gestures, symbols, and rules to convey meaning and express thoughts, ideas, emotions, and information among individuals within a community.

The first chapter nicely summarizes various classic perspectives on human language as a phenomenon and serves as a good introduction to the field of linguistics, a multifaceted discipline that explores the structure, evolution, and use of language in all its forms and variations. The authors are well aware of the vastness of the linguistic field; therefore, they narrow down the topic throughout the narrative from various perspectives (genealogical, historical, geographical, social, etc.) to the scope of the linguistic approach to the Japanese language, which they will address throughout the entire book.

Furthermore, the authors provide a detailed description and illustrate with examples various linguistic disciplines. Notably, the inclusion of Croatian and Japanese linguistic concepts enhances the book’s value, making it a significant contribution to specialized terminology in both languages.

In addition, there is a very informative subsection that discusses the historical circumstances (political, professional, etc.) of the formation of the terms “kokugo” and “Nihongo.” Furthermore, it covers the linguistic approaches of “kokugogaku” and “nihongogaku,” which further introduce the field of teaching Japanese as a second language.

Undoubtedly, the chapter stands out for its wealth of information, skillfully drawing from classical works on Japanese linguistics as well as the latest cutting-edge research.

3 Chapter 2: “Osnovna obilježja japanskog jezika”

Linguistic typology is the study of the common structural features and patterns found across languages, classifying them into different types based on shared characteristics. Japanese, within the context of linguistic typology, is categorized as a member of the “subject-object-verb” (SOV) language type. This means that in Japanese sentences, the typical word order is subject-object-verb, where the subject comes first, followed by the object, and the verb appears at the end. Additionally, Japanese is known for its extensive use of honorifics and politeness levels, which influence not only vocabulary but also the overall structure of speech. As a member of the Japonic language family, Japanese exhibits unique grammatical features, such as a complex system of verb conjugations and particles that play crucial roles in indicating grammatical relationships.

Its distinct characteristics make Japanese a fascinating subject for linguistic typology studies and contribute to the rich tapestry of language diversity worldwide.

In this book, the authors skillfully present a wealth of linguistic facts that form the foundation for detailed explanations of morphology and syntax, which are consistently explored throughout Chapter 2. The constant comparisons drawn between Japanese and Croatian morphological and syntactic structures enrich the reader's understanding of both languages, fostering a deeper appreciation of their similarities and differences.

One of the noteworthy sections in this chapter delves into the intricacies of Japanese social structure, interpersonal relationships, and social deixis of the language. The authors offer precise insights into how politeness and respect are conveyed through linguistic forms, as well as the usage of passive structures and verbs related to giving and receiving. This section proves particularly valuable for both local readers seeking to gain a profound grasp of the cultural intricacies embedded in the language and general readers eager to comprehend the complexities of Japanese social dynamics.

Another key highlight is the examination of different types of modality in Japanese, which plays a vital role in adding subtle shades of meaning to language. The authors skillfully illustrate how modality enhances communication, making it more contextually appropriate and nuanced. By providing several representative examples and main references, this section serves as an informative resource for language enthusiasts looking to explore the expressive potential of modality in Japanese communication.

It is important to recognize the interconnections between various linguistic levels. By demonstrating that these levels are not isolated entities, the authors underline the necessity of a comprehensive understanding of the grammatical domain for truly grasping the Japanese language within its natural context. This holistic approach enables learners to utilize the language successfully and coherently, appreciating the intricate interplay of linguistic elements in everyday communication.

While Chapter 2 provides valuable insights into the essential grammatical features from different linguistic disciplines, it does so within a relatively concise space of approximately 30 pages. This brevity, while expected in a comprehensive study of the language, may leave some language enthusiasts yearning for further in-depth exploration and analysis. Despite this limitation, the chapter remains a valuable stepping stone for readers seeking a solid foundation in Japanese linguistics.

4 Chapter 3: “Glasovni sustav japanskog jezika”

Spoken language is recognized as the foremost of human communication and a primary generator of language changes. Least embedded in the rigidity of a written record, it holds up a mirror not only to its own but also to morphological, syntactic, pragmatic,

and other language processes. Its important role is adequately demonstrated in the chapter on Japanese sound structure (“Glasovni sustav japanskog jezika”), which consists of more than forty pages of concisely described Japanese segmental and prosodic information. Nicely incorporating bits of linguistic theories, the author provides readers with a coherent explanation of the Japanese sounds, their phonological system, and some morphophonological processes, discusses the Japanese basic prosodic unit, and ties it up with prosodic characteristics such as Japanese word accent and rhythm. Throughout the chapter – as well as the whole book –, explanations are well illustrated by numerous examples and comparisons with Croatian and are therefore expected to well serve both the students of Japanese and researchers on the Japanese language.

In the introductory part, it is stated clearly that the languages of description and comparison are the Standard Japanese and Standard Croatian language.

The reader’s attention is immediately drawn by an interesting approach, in which the author uses some Croatian geographical names and transliterates them into Japanese in order to compare the phonetic composition of the two languages. This approach seems to have a weakness in the sense that the arbitrariness between a spoken language and its writing system might leave the impression that the difference between the two language sound systems is bigger than actual. Also, although the adoption of words seems to be a one-way process, namely that the adopted words would take over the phonology of the target language, we know that with adopted words the sound repertoire of the Japanese language is also expanding (the appearance of palatalized sounds into the Japanese language, the need for expansion of the katakana character system, etc.). While both weaknesses are dealt with in the phonetic and phonological explanation, active sound changes in a language could receive more attention and could offer a reader stronger cross-references to the chapter on the Japanese writing system. Understandably, current language processes are usually weakly represented in the literature and it is difficult to set the appropriate depth of introduction.

Cross-references to other book chapters could also be emphasized in other subsections such as the section on morphophonological processes. The author would thus better demonstrate the mutual interaction between phonological processes and those at other linguistic levels.

Such mutual interactions are nevertheless reported strong within phonology itself, between segmental and suprasegmental processes. As one of the consequences is the formation of the moraic unit as the basic prosodic unit in the Japanese language, which is presented in this work clearly, in a well-balanced manner, and independent of different linguistic views. The prosodic part thus starts with an explanation of Japanese rhythm and nicely bridges it with traditional poetry, language games, and other paralinguistic aspects. There is a detailed description of the Japanese pitch accent, its

basic characteristics, and some extensions to the accentuation on compounds. Interesting is the last remark on the current accentual deviances, which leaves a reader wanting to know more about Japanese accentuation.

In the end, a section on intonation would round the topic down to the level of the actual production of Japanese. On the other hand, it is well-known that intonation is in itself treated as an autonomous grammar, and is perhaps left out on purpose to become a separate volume.

5 Chapter 4: “Leksik japanskog jezika”

Understanding and possessing a rich lexicon, comprising a vast array of words and expressions, holds significant power in shaping how people interact, perceive the world, and express their thoughts and emotions.

Japanese, a fascinating language with a rich cultural heritage, exhibits a unique lexical structure that has evolved over centuries of historical and cultural interactions. Within the Japanese language, we encounter diverse lexical strata, namely the original Japanese or Yamato stratum (和語 *wago*), Sino-Japanese stratum (漢語 *kango*), Western loans (外来語 *gairaigo*) each representing layers of vocabulary borrowed from various sources and assimilated to Japanese in particular ways as in hybrid compounds (混種語 *konshugo*), which are – interesting and welcome – in this book treated as an independent lexical stratum.

These lexical strata thoroughly described in Chapter 4 (“Leksik japanskog jezika”) provide valuable insights into Japan's historical connections with neighboring cultures and the global exchange of ideas which stimulates the reader's desire for a deeper understanding of Japanese history, society, and evolution of the Japanese language.

The examination of morphological characteristics unveils a multi-layered landscape, showcasing the fusion of native Japanese words from the Yamato stratum with borrowed terms from the Sino-Japanese and Western loans. The authors skillfully illustrate how these different morphological elements blend harmoniously to express various concepts, reflecting Japan's historical connections with neighboring cultures.

Moving on to phonological aspects, the chapter explores how the pronunciation and phonetic structure of words from the diverse strata have integrated into Japanese phonology. The intricate interplay of sounds and accents demonstrates how the language has adapted and assimilated foreign influences, resulting in a unique phonological repertoire that resonates with both tradition and modernity.

The exploration of semantic characteristics is equally fascinating, as the authors delve into the subtle nuances of meaning found within each lexical stratum. It would be worth noting that native Japanese words carry cultural connotations and evoke a

sense of heritage, whereas Sino-Japanese words bring in complex and formal expressions, enriching academic and literary domains. Additionally, the infusion of Western loans brings a touch of modernity and global perspectives, bridging Japan with the broader international community.

Perhaps a shortcoming that did not go unnoticed is that mimetic vocabulary was left unmentioned in the chapter. Mimetic vocabulary is well-represented in the Japanese language and, like other lexical strata, exhibits distinctive phonological, morphological, and syntactic features. The authors likely omitted it with the intention of addressing it as a separate extensive topic, which it indeed deserves.

6 Appendix: “Japanska grafija”

In the realm of world languages, the Japanese script stands out as one of the most captivating and intricate systems. Drawing inspiration from Chinese characters, where kanji characters are used to represent their tonal and monosyllabic language, Japan faced the challenge of adapting this script to its own agglutinative language. With its rich multi-syllabic and polymorphic vocabulary, which includes inflectional word types, the Japanese writing system underwent extensive modifications to find its perfect match.

In the appendix on Japanese Graphemes (“Japanska grafija”), the evolution of the Japanese script and its necessary adaptations was well illustrated with examples. This seamless integration of various writing systems eloquently illustrates the diverse Japanese lexical strata explored in the preceding chapter.

However, one can't help but wonder if the authors could have delved deeper into this aspect, particularly regarding recently borrowed words, which find their expression in katakana. This part of the Japanese lexicon proves to be a dynamic soundscape, sparking new combinations of characters beyond the foundational set of 50 characters (50 音図 *gojūonzu*). A notable observation is that the introductory glimpse into the third chapter mainly excludes the newer, more complex katakana characters. This suggests a deliberate decision by the authors, possibly reserving a comprehensive exploration of this vast topic for a future installment in the series.

The concluding part of the appendix brings to light two romanization systems: the widely embraced Hepburn system, commonly found in Japanese language textbooks for foreign learners, and the phonologically-grounded Kunrei system. To enhance the reader's understanding, a more explicit connection between the latter and the preceding chapters on Japanese lexicon and pronunciation, along with phonological processes at the phonetic level, would be highly beneficial. The Kunrei system effectively demonstrates consonant deviations between spelling and pronunciation, as well as the relationships between phonemes and their distinct allophones.

7 Concluding thoughts

The scientific monograph “Uvod u znanost o japanskom jeziku: Osnovna obilježja, glasovni sustav i leksički slojevi” serves as a groundbreaking exploration of the Japanese language, introducing new content and terminology into the Croatian language. The book provides a comprehensive overview of the Japanese language, examining it at all linguistic levels, from phonetics and syntax to semantics, pragmatics, and sociolinguistics. Understanding the cultural and societal differences between Japanese and European languages becomes essential, making the latter aspects indispensable.

The monograph not only embraces contemporary general linguistic and Japanological perspectives but also includes insights from traditional Japanese linguistics. These contrasting interpretations, particularly from the standpoint of Croatian and other Shtokavian languages, offer valuable insights. Additionally, the book contributes to the field of applied linguistics.

While discourse studies could be more prominently represented, this minor drawback doesn't diminish the overall value of the book. It presents stimulating ideas for further comparative research in Croatia and the broader realm of Slavic languages, making it a rich resource for interdisciplinary work. Finally, the label “Volume 1” (“1. svezak”) on the cover suggests that this book is merely the first in a series of monographs on Japanese linguistics. Therefore, readers can look forward to more detailed explorations of specific linguistic aspects of the Japanese language in the future.

In essence, the publication of this book represents a significant and crucial first step in integrating the Japanese language and its linguistic form into the Croatian pedagogical and scientific community. Scholars and language enthusiasts alike will find immense value in yet another exploration of Japanese linguistics.

References

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