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## **Old, Middle and New: The Problem of Language Periodisation in Diachronic Research on Japanese**

### **Abstract**

The paper discusses the problem of the periodisation of the Japanese language history, raising both the question of the division into periods itself and the terminological issues as well. The former aspect, that of establishing the time boundaries between periods, is a most basic element of any diachronic description, and yet most historical linguists of Japanese appear to settle for adopting the socio-political periodisation as it comes, which is hardly satisfying or even acceptable in linguistic research. Terminology, on the other hand, can be regarded as purely arbitrary and conventional, as well as language-bound, but certain names of periods – even if this is not fully intended – do suggest a stronger connexion between particular stages of language development. The meta-analysis of the proposals to date, with a focus on any deviations from the socio-political history, leads the author to offer a different periodisation scheme which may serve as a much more effective tool in further diachronic research of Japanese.

**Keywords:** Japanese language history, periodisation of Japanese, Old Japanese, Classical Japanese, Middle Japanese, New Japanese, Modern Japanese



The present article aims to raise the question of the periodisation of the history of the Japanese language, with a focus on its literate (written) phase. There are two aspects to this problem, which – although seemingly independent of each other – are nevertheless partly connected: the division itself and the terminology. This article does not seek to propose an ultimate solution to both these issues, but rather to recapitulate the contemporary state of the art, both in Japan and in the West, and to spark off a debate over this thorny and (therefore?) neglected point in the diachronic study of Japanese. It has a nature similar to meta-analysis, with the reservation that it is deliberately deprived of the statistical dimension, since frequent copying from author to author renders any numerical data irrelevant. The material for this examination has been selected from either fairly recent or still standard reference publications, but only such that contain a complete periodisation scheme of the written phase of Japanese.<sup>1</sup>

### Preliminaries

On account of the ever-present geographical and social diversification of Japanese, as well as the early fossilisation of the language of official or high-style writing, it is not at all easy to determine what is actually subject to periodisation here. It will perhaps be safe to define it as the history of the spoken Japanese language, to the extent that it is reflected in written sources, in its variant dominating (in terms of prestige, the quantity of materials, and geographical spread) at a particular stage of development.

For a periodisation of the history of any given language – that is, for a division into periods based on linguistic features – it seems logical and reasonable to adopt some general rules. Inspired both positively and negatively, by, among other things, discussions about the periodisation of Polish (Urbańczyk 1979) and of Yiddish (Weinreich 2008, vol. II, pp. 719–733), the present author has found the following three points to be of special importance:

1. Linguistic periodisation may coincide with that of the literary, cultural, socio-political, or economic history, but it is, in principle, autonomous and independent of them (though of course not completely detached from them), so one should not stubbornly insist on any correlation.
2. The boundaries between individual stages are to be established where language changes accumulate, and since they never occur at a single point in time (say, in a particular year or even decade), the boundaries should be rounded to approximate dates: centuries or half-centuries at the very most (cf. Ōki 2018, pp. 23–24). Admittedly, extralinguistic events of particular importance are sometimes chosen to mark the

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boundary (e.g., the oldest written text or the first printed book), but they are rather to be understood as mnemonic devices and never to be taken literally.

3. The usual European terminology makes use of the adjectives *old*, *middle*, *new* and/or *modern* combined with the name of the language. In some traditions, *new* and *modern* are used for two distinct stages in history, while in others, they denote the same stage (in which case only one of the terms is employed). Additional qualifiers, such as *early* and *late*, serve to divide *old*, *middle* and *new* into sub-periods. Deviations like German *Frühneuhochdeutsch* as a stage on a par with *Alt-*, *Mittel-*, and *Neuhochdeutsch* are better not imitated.

Of course, it goes without saying that periodisations of long standing within certain philologies will not be changed merely because of their inconsistencies and idiosyncrasies. However, wherever there is a chance of improvement (and a chance of accepting the improvement), it seems advisable to follow the guidelines listed above.

### Terminologies

Turning now to the Japanese language, it must be noted that many historical linguists settle for adopting the socio-political – or administrative? (Ōki 2018, p. 24) – periodisation as it stands. Occasionally, a distanced heading of some kind precedes the list (e.g. Martin 1987, p. 77: “Periods discussed by Japanese grammarians”; Takeuchi 1999, p. xii: “It is common in Japanese historical linguistics to divide the history of the language...”), or the time boundaries are rounded a little, yet this most widespread periodisation inevitably fails to meet any of the three requirements mentioned above. Here are a few examples, chosen randomly out of many more (the Japanese terms for the great epochs refer directly to the socio-political periods that follow them on the list below, and they are therefore not easily translatable into English; the years for each of these periods refer either to the seat of government or to the imperial reign, as its name indicates, although minor divergences exist in some cases):

#### A. *jōdai* 上代: Nara (710–784)

- *Old Japanese*: Miller 1967, p. 35 (eighth century), Ramsey 1979, p. 160 (700–800), Martin 1987, p. 77 (ca 700–800), Takeuchi 1999, p. xii (–794), Miyake 2020, p. 12 (ca late 600s–800), *Altjapanisch*: Lewin 1996, p. 8 (Nara), Rothaug 1991, p. 6 (Yamato [ca 630–710]–Nara<sup>2</sup>), *giapponese antico*: Calvetti 1999, p. 28 (–Nara), *starojapoński*: Majtczak 2008, p. 11 (eighth century<sup>3</sup>), *starověk*: Klíma 2022, p. 15 (–Nara)

<sup>2</sup> Note that different dates for all five periods are given in the final chapter “Diachrone Zusammenfassung” (Petra Rothaug, *Abriß der japanischen Lautgeschichte*, Hamburg 1991, p. 85), following Jens Rickmeyer’s seminar in Marburg in the summer semester of 1988.

<sup>3</sup> A different periodisation is presented in Tomasz Majtczak, *The inflexional system of Classical Japanese*, Kraków 2016, pp. 11–13.

- B. *chūko* 中古: Heian (794–1185)
- *late Old Japanese*: Miller 1967, p. 37 (ninth–twelfth century), *Late Old Japanese*: Ramsey 1979, p. 160 (800–1200), Takeuchi 1999, p. xii (794–1191), *giapponese tardo antico*: Calvetti 1999, p. 61 (Heian)
  - *Early Middle Japanese*: Martin 1987, p. 77 (800–1200), Miyake 2020, p. 13 (ca 800–1200), *frühes Mitteljapanisch*: Lewin 1996, p. 9 (Heian), *raný středověk*: Klíma 2022, p. 15 (Heian)
  - *Klassischjapanisch*: Rothaug 1991, p. 21 (Heian), *klasyczny japoński*: Majtczak 2008, p. 12 (ninth–twelfth century)
- C. *chūsei* 中世: Kamakura (1185–1333), Muromachi (1336–1573)
- *Middle Japanese*: Miller 1967, p. 46 (thirteenth–sixteenth century), Ramsey 1979, p. 160 (1200–1600), Takeuchi 1999, p. xii (1192–1602), *Mitteljapanisch*: Lewin 1996, p. 10 (Kamakura–Muromachi), Rothaug 1991, p. 41 (Kamakura–Muromachi), *giapponese medio*: Calvetti 1999, p. 91 (Kamakura–Muromachi<sup>4</sup>), *średniojapoński*: Majtczak 2008, p. 12 (thirteenth–sixteenth century), *středověk*: Klíma 2022, p. 15 (Kamakura–Muromachi)
  - *Late Middle Japanese*: Martin 1987, p. 77 (1200–1600), Miyake 2020, p. 14 (ca 1200–1600)
- D. *kinsei* 近世: Edo (1603–1867)
- *Neujapanisch*: Lewin 1996, p. 12 (Edo), Rothaug 1991, p. 53 (Edo), *nowojapoński*: Majtczak 2008, p. 13 (seventeenth–nineteenth century)
  - *giapponese pre-moderno*: Calvetti 1999, p. 138 (Tokugawa [= Edo]), *předmoderní doba*: Klíma 2022, p. 15 (Edo)
  - *early Modern Japanese*: Miller 1967, p. 52 (seventeenth century to 1868), *Early Modern Japanese*: Takeuchi 1999, p. xii (1603–1867), Miyake 2020, p. 15 (ca 1600–late 1800s)
  - *Modern Japanese*: Ramsey 1979, p. 160 (1600–1867), Martin 1987, p. 77 (1603–1867)
- E. *kindai* 近代 and/or *gendai* 現代: Meiji (1868–1912), Taishō (1912–1926), Shōwa (1926–1989), Heisei (1989–2019), Reiwa (2019–)
- *modern standard language*: Miller 1967, p. 57 (1868–), *Modern Japanese*: Takeuchi 1999, p. xii (1868–), *giapponese moderno*: Calvetti 1999, p. 175 (Meiji–), *moderní doba*: Klíma 2022, p. 15 (Meiji–)
  - *Contemporary Japanese*: Ramsey 1979, p. 160 (1867–), Martin 1987, p. 77 (1867–), Miyake 2020, p. 16 (late 1800s–present), *Sprache der Gegenwart*: Lewin 1996, p. 13 (from the end of the nineteenth century onwards), *Gegenwartsjapanisch*: Rothaug 1991, p. 72 (Meiji–Taishō–Shōwa), *współczesny japoński*: Majtczak 2008, p. 13 (twentieth century)

<sup>4</sup> In the first chapter on periodisation (Paolo Calvetti, *Introduzione alla storia della lingua giapponese*, Napoli 1999, p. 6), this stage also includes the Insei period, on which see below.

The same custom is followed in Japan but, significantly, Japanese scholars avoid the terminological quandaries by simply using either the names of the great epochs: *jōdai* (rarely, *jōko* 上古) – *chūko* – *chūsei* (very rarely, *kinko* 近古) – *kinsei* – *kindai* & *gendai*, or the names of the socio-political periods: *Nara* – *Heian* – *Kamakura* & *Muromachi* (rarely separately, *Kamakura* – *Muromachi*) – *Edo* (sometimes divided into two halves) – *Meiji and after*. Again, to name just a few examples: KgJ, the preposed *Kōmoku ichiran hyō*, p. 13; Hayashi & Ikegami 1979, the postposed *Furoku*, pp. 4–13 (the term *jōko* is used); Yamaguchi et al. 1997, pp. 2–4 (but in the body of the text, the *Edo* period is divided in two); Kobayashi & Umebayashi 2005, p. 1; Okimori 2010, p. 6 (*Kamakura* and *Muromachi* are treated separately), etc. Problems with the dating of individual language stages are not infrequently mentioned and sometimes even discussed at greater length by diachronic researchers of Japanese, including those cited here. Yet, this is often where the matter ends, although repeated attempts at other divisions have been made since at least the second half of the eighteenth century, or mid-*Edo*, if you like (see Nakada & Tsukishima 1969, pp. 413–414; Okimori 2018, p. 5). It is also worth noting that, in Japanese, the names of epochs or socio-political periods are commonly converted into the names of language stages by appending to them either *-go* 語 ‘language’ (e.g., *jōdai-go*) or *-jidai-go* 時代語 ‘language of the period’ (e.g., *Nara-jidai-go*).

The five phases described above, A–E, will serve here as a useful starting point for discussion. As can already be seen, the three usual European names for language stages will hardly be enough, so it appears reasonable to use *new* and *modern* as two distinct terms. Additionally, one more name, *classical*, has already been used specifically for phase B in several publications (cf. the brief survey in Majtczak 2016, p. 13), and it could also prove helpful.

It needs to be emphasised that the additional qualifiers *early* and *late* (whether capitalised or not) in the aforementioned Western-language examples are not explained by their authors (or their users) as referring to sub-periods, but they are rather presented, even if only tacitly, as rightful counterparts to the periods without such qualifiers. Statements like that by Lewin (1996, p. 9: “Die Sprache der Heian-Zeit [...] bildet das Übergangsstadium vom Alt- zum Mitteljapanischen. Wir bezeichnen sie als frühes Mitteljapanisch”) can hardly serve as a satisfactory justification. Moreover, it is not at all clear that e.g. phase B, when called *Early Middle Japanese*, is regarded as closer to *Middle Japanese*, which follows it, and that the same time span, when called *Late Old Japanese*, is seen as closer to *Old Japanese* preceding it. This, however, is exactly what these names suggest.<sup>5</sup> Miller (1967, p. 37), for instance, gives his *late Old Japanese*

<sup>5</sup> The terms *Early Middle Japanese* (*Frühes Mitteljapanisch*) and *Late Middle Japanese* (*Spätes Mitteljapanisch*), which imply closer proximity between the periods so named and which can – intentionally or not – easily lead to conflating them under a more general term of *Middle Japanese*, have rightly been criticised by Sven Osterkamp in his review of: Martina Ebi, Viktoria Eschbach-Szabo: «Japanische Sprachwissenschaft. Eine Einführung für Japanologen und Linguisten», *Japonica Humboldtiana* 19 (2017), p. 213. A great dividing line in the history of Japanese, falling at some point within the latter of these two phases and thus forcing us to abandon any idea of one unbroken stage here, will be addressed below.

alongside Lewin's *frühes Mitteljapanisch* without a single word of comment. Frellesvig, on the other hand, in an earlier publication of his (Frellesvig 1995, p. 11), recognises three main periods, *Old Japanese* (700–800), *Middle Japanese* (800–1600) and *Modern Japanese* (1600–), where Middle Japanese “falls in two distinct periods”, namely *Early Middle* (800–1200) and *Late Middle* (1200–1600), but in a later one (Frellesvig 2010, p. 1), there are already four periods of equal status, *Old*, *Early Middle*, *Late Middle*, and *Modern* (with the same dating as before), with no umbrella term used for the two “Middle” periods.

Only rarely do we find a clearly structured and unambiguous layout of the main periods and their sub-periods, as in the introduction to the Japanese language by Irwin and Zisk (2019, pp. 7–8):

*Old Japanese* (8th c)

*Middle Japanese*: *Early Middle Japanese* (9<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> c)

*Late Middle Japanese* (13<sup>th</sup>–16<sup>th</sup> c)

*Modern Japanese*: *Early Modern Japanese* (17<sup>th</sup>–mid-19<sup>th</sup> c)

*Near-Modern Japanese* (late 19<sup>th</sup> c–1940s)

*Contemporary Japanese* (late 1940s–present)

Another example, this time in German, can be found in a similar introductory book by Ebi and Eschbach-Szabo (2015, pp. 57–63):

*Altjapanisch* (700–800)

*Mitteljapanisch*: *frühes Mitteljapanisch* (800–1200)

*spätes Mitteljapanisch* (1200–1600)

*Neujapanisch*: *frühes Neujapanisch* (1600–1868)

*spätes Neujapanisch* (1868–1912)

*Modernes Japanisch* (1912–)

It may be mentioned in passing that *frühes Neujapanisch* and *spätes Neujapanisch* for the given years are not terms of any established practice in Japanology, as duly noted by Osterkamp (2017, pp. 212–213), and neither is *Near-Modern Japanese* for that matter (see above regarding *Middle Japanese*). Straightforward as these presentations are, they do not necessarily correspond with linguistic facts (cf. immediately below). It goes without saying that both periodisations closely coincide with the socio-political division.

A structured periodisation of a very different kind, based on linguistic features instead of the not very felicitous names of periods, can be illustrated with the following two schemes. The first is offered by Schneider (1989):

*Altjapanisch*: *Früh-Altjapanisch* (end of the 6<sup>th</sup>–first third of the 9<sup>th</sup> c)

*Spät-Altjapanisch* (beginning of the 9<sup>th</sup>–end of the 11<sup>th</sup> c)

*Mitteljapanisch*: *Früh-Mitteljapanisch* (end of the 11<sup>th</sup>–end of the 14<sup>th</sup> c)

*Spät-Mitteljapanisch* (end of the 14<sup>th</sup>–first third of the 17<sup>th</sup> c)

*Neujapanisch*: *Früh-Neujapanisch* (end of the first third of the 17<sup>th</sup>–mid-18<sup>th</sup> c)

*Spät-Neujapanisch* (mid-18<sup>th</sup> c–first years after the Meiji Restoration)

The other, not too different, comes from Narrog (2016, p. 250), and is supplemented below with the final sub-period given in square brackets:

- Old Japanese:*      *Early Old Japanese* (ca 600–ca 800)  
                              *Late Old Japanese* (ca 800–ca 1100)
- Middle Japanese:*   *Early Middle Japanese* (ca 1100–ca 1350)  
                              *Late Middle Japanese* (ca 1350–ca 1750)
- Modern Japanese:*   *Early Modern Japanese* (ca 1750–ca 1870)  
                              [? *Late Modern Japanese* (ca 1870–)]

### Periodisations so far

Moving now once more from the West to Japan, it must be stressed that the usual five phases listed above, A–E, are not the only ones encountered in Japanese research; both more and fewer stages are sometimes recognised as well. Here again, reference is traditionally made to historical divisions. Hence, apart from those already explained, several further terms call for clarification. These include two pre-Nara periods: Kofun (ca fourth–sixth century) and Asuka (592–710), and three short sub-periods of mainly political importance: Insei (1086–1192), Nambokuchō (1336–1392), and Azuchi-Momoyama (1568–1600). Moreover, one new name for a greater epoch requires introduction, namely *kodai* 古代, which, as before, is difficult to translate sensibly into English.

**Table 1. Various proposals for dividing the history of Japanese based on the political periods**

politics	7 stages	6 stages (+)	6 stages	5 stages	4 stages	3 stages	2 stages
Kofun Asuka Nara	<i>kodai</i> I ( <i>jōdai</i> )	<i>jōdai</i>	<i>kodai</i> I	<i>jōdai</i>	<i>kodai</i>	<i>kodai</i>	<i>kodai</i>
Heian	<i>kodai</i> II ( <i>chūko</i> )	<i>chūko</i>	<i>kodai</i> II	<i>chūko</i>			
Insei Kamakura	<i>chūsei</i> I	<i>chūsei</i> I	<i>chūsei</i>	<i>chūsei</i>	<i>chūsei</i>	<i>chūsei</i>	
Nambokuchō Muromachi Azuchi-Momoyama	<i>chūsei</i> II	<i>chūsei</i> II					
Edo	<i>kinsei</i> I	<i>kinsei</i>	<i>kinsei</i> I	<i>kinsei</i>	<i>kinsei</i>	<i>kindai</i>	<i>kindai</i>
	<i>kinsei</i> II		<i>kinsei</i> II				
Meiji and after	<i>kindai</i> ( <i>gendai</i> )	<i>kindai</i> / <i>gendai</i>	<i>kindai</i>	<i>kindai</i>	<i>kindai</i>		

Above is a very lucid and helpful table adopted from a recent article by Okimori (2018, p. 10), which shows various proposals for dividing the history of Japanese into stages ranging from two to seven. T. Satō (2001, p. 14) and Hyakutome (2019, p. 54) offer very similar but somewhat smaller lists, with minor differences in terminology (noted here in brackets). They also include one additional division, which is listed in the table above under the heading of “6 stages (+)”, again with one terminological divergence between Hyakutome and Satō. The Roman numerals I and II represent the original *zenki* 前期 ‘first part, early period’ and *kōki* 後期 ‘latter part, late period’ respectively.

It is remarkable to see here the already mentioned great dividing line between the political periods of Kamakura and Muromachi (cf. the two-stage periodisation), a line that is somehow lost in most other, more detailed divisions. Okimori (2010, p. 6; also 2018, p. 6 [sic]) makes it clear that the traditional and widespread division into phases A–E, where Kamakura and Muromachi are grouped together, is a periodisation based on the history of literature, and not language; quite naturally then, a book edited by him deals with Kamakura and Muromachi separately. However, when the same publication (Okimori 2010, p. 6) presents the most general periodisations explicitly based on linguistic features, the twofold division has its only boundary in the year 1392 (the end of Nambokuchō) – fair enough – yet in the threefold division, the boundaries are, surprisingly, placed in 1086 (the beginning of Insei) and 1603 (the beginning of Edo). One cannot resist the impression that various non-linguistic factors continue to play an important, and sometimes unspoken, role in all these periodisations (cf. e.g. Sakakura 1977, pp. 222–223; K. Satō 1999, pp. 10–11).

## Reperiodisation

As indicated earlier, the present analysis will take the five phases A–E as the point of departure. Less detailed divisions, which combine two or more phases, will not be addressed, as such mergers tend to blur the concept of periodisation and render it less useful, if not downright useless. Hence, only potential splits of stages and – above all – shifts of boundaries will be discussed.

### Phase A (politically, 710–784)

The beginning is usually either equated with the advent of the Nara period or not specified at all. The former approach is too restrictive, as there are certainly written materials predating the year 710. The latter, by contrast, seems too broad, encompassing the Kofun period or perhaps even earlier times, when the language might have been quite different, but there are absolutely no texts to prove or disprove it (cf. K. Satō 1999, p. 10). Miyake (2020, p. 12) suggested “c. late 600s,” since the oldest known coherent Japanese texts come from wooden tablets (*mokkan* 木簡) which can roughly be dated to the second

half of the seventh century (see also Lurie 2011, pp. 121–125). The “c. late 600s” can be replaced by 650, or better still, 600 (Calvetti 1999, p. 1; Rickmeyer 2017, p. 13; Majtczak 2016, p. 12; Schreiber 2022, p. xiv) in order to include the ten Buddhist texts collectively known as *Suiko(-chō/-ki) ibun* 推古(朝/期)遺文 ‘literary remains from the time of Empress Suiko’ – while the oldest of them are probably not earlier than the first half of the seventh century, they are all traditionally dated to Suiko’s reign, i.e. 592–628 (cf. Lurie 2011, p. 125). However, moving this lower boundary any further back – say, to the sixth (Narrog 1999, p. 27) or even fifth century (Okimori 2018, p. 6) – would probably be neither necessary nor really justified.

The year 800 is on the other hand too early as the approximate upper limit of this period and undoubtedly should be shifted forward by fifty years or even a century (cf. Sakakura 1977, p. 258; K. Satō 1999, p. 10) – both for phonological reasons (Majtczak 2016, p. 11: “850”) and for morphological ones (Osterkamp 2021, p. 19: “the time seems overdue to amend the dating of OJ to extend to at least 850, possibly even slightly further”). Though the passage from this stage to the next was admittedly related to the transfer of the capital from Nara to Heian (present-day Kyoto), language changes were by no means immediate, but extended over time (see Osterkamp 2021, pp. 20–21).

The name *Old Japanese* is virtually the only one used for this period.

### Phase B (politically, 794–1185)

As with all subsequent periods, this stage begins where the previous one ends. Nevertheless, twilight zones of transition and overlap are inevitable.

The greatest problem in this phase, discussed for decades, is the question of the twelfth century, politically included in the Heian period but singled out within it under the name of Insei. The language of these hundred years or so differed in many respects from that of the preceding centuries, and showed a number of traits in common with the following period of Kamakura (for a discussion of these traits, see T. Satō 1999, pp. 140–159). Sometimes these features are judged sufficient to place the boundary around the year 1100 (cf. Doi 1996, p. [4]; K. Satō 1999, p. 10), while at other times Insei is still grouped with Heian, i.e. in phase B (see Miller 1967, p. 41; Yamaguchi et al. 1997, p. 3).

The name *Late Old Japanese* would only be acceptable if this stage were regarded as a sub-period together with the preceding one, in which case the latter must be termed *Early Old Japanese* (which it hardly ever is, though cf. Schneider and Narrog above). The same applies to *Early Middle Japanese*, mutatis mutandis. The term *Classical Japanese*, in contrast, is often used more vaguely, referring to ‘pre-Modern Japanese’ (not to mention its possible ideological bias), but at least it does not wrongly suggest any proximity to adjacent periods, which is of paramount importance for periodisation. This last name is retained herein also because of “the importance of Classical Japanese in literature and in the spiritual culture in general” since it “provided the foundation for the written language of the centuries to come” (Majtczak 2016, p. 13).

### Phase C (politically, 1185–1573)

This phase contains, somewhere around its midpoint, the great dividing line already brought up above. Its importance lies in the fact that, around that time, the language lost most of the features that linked it to the earlier periods and became more modern in nature (for a selection of these features, see e.g. Yamaguchi et al. 1997, pp. 5–6; Hyakutome 2019, p. 54). The “point” of time in question is often identified with the transition between Kamakura and Muromachi, or, in other words, with the Nambokuchō period (see Sakakura 1977, pp. 220–221, 258; K. Satō 1999, pp. 9–10; T. Satō 2001, pp. 14–15, and the overall structure of this last book), so that the boundary can be placed at 1350. That this dividing line is not drawn earlier is, at least in part, due to the state of the linguistic materials at our disposal. After phase B, when the differences between the spoken and written language were not substantial, there probably came a time of noticeable divergence between the two. Yet, the extant texts only show one side of the coin, because materials reflecting the spoken language, which was already much closer to contemporary Japanese, do not appear until well after 1400. These include, among others, certain texts of the *shōmono* 抄物 genre, i.e. records of lectures featuring commentaries on works of mainly Chinese origin, as well as some of the *kirishitan shiryō* キリシタン資料, i.e. publications by European missionaries (Yamaguchi et al. 1997, p. 4; Okimori 2018, p. 7). In this case, extralinguistic factors determine our knowledge and therefore the periodisation as well. It should also be emphasised that this great dividing line is drawn on the basis of the phonetic and especially morphosyntactic features of Japanese, as for instance the vocabulary or the writing system often tell a very different story (see Ōki 2018, pp. 28–30).

Treating Kamakura and Muromachi together (as e.g. in Doi 1996, p. [4], where Insei is also grouped with these two) may have literary motivations, as noted earlier, or it may be the result of viewing them as an exceedingly long transitional stage (cf. Sakakura 1977, pp. 255, 257–258; T. Satō 2001, p. 14; Hyakutome 2019, p. 54).

The prevalent name for this phase is *Middle Japanese*. The longer variant *Late Middle Japanese* presents fundamental problems that have already been addressed.

### Phase D (politically, 1603–1867)

The attentive reader will notice that the previous stage has not ended yet, and for good reason: the boundary must be shifted, just as it was in phase A, since “[...] the year 800 is about as insignificant to the history of the Japanese language as the year 1600 is. The actual linguistic caesurae lie elsewhere” (Osterkamp 2021, p. 21). This delay in the passage to the next stage – relative to the transfer of the capital and, hence, the language centre, this time from Kyoto to Edo (present-day Tokyo) – was caused less by the slow progression of linguistic change and more by the preservation of cultural and economic dominance of the former region and the belated rise to power of the latter.

The actual boundary is, therefore, the year 1750 (T. Satō 2001, p. 15; Okimori 2018, pp. 7–8; Hyakutome 2019, pp. 62–63; Rickmeyer 2017, p. 13; Narrog 1999, p. 28; Majtczak 2016, p. 12), or perhaps 1700 (Schreiber 2022, pp. xiv–xv).<sup>6</sup> This is exactly the reason why the Edo period, i.e. phase D, is every now and then divided into two halves in diachronic descriptions of Japanese (see above). It must be stressed, however, that unlike other boundaries, this one results more from the geographical shift of the dominant centre than from the historical development of the language. The speech of the Kamigata 上方 region (Kyoto-Osaka area) does not vanish from written sources but continues to exist alongside the language of Edo (Tokyo).

Rounding the year 1867 to 1900 and taking it as the end of this period is hardly debatable, and indeed not really debated by anyone (cf. K. Satō 1999, p. 10).

As for the name, *Early Modern Japanese* is tainted with the same fatal flaw as indicated before. *Modern Japanese* is better reserved for the last stage in the development of the language, which leaves only one option, namely *New Japanese*.

### Phase E (politically, 1868–)

The final stage in the history of Japanese is the least troublesome. It starts around 1900 and continues to this day. It can reasonably be called *Modern Japanese*, and perhaps divided into early and late sub-periods, with the Second World War (rounded up to 1950) as the boundary between them. Late Modern Japanese could also be termed *Contemporary Japanese*.

## Outcomes

It is time for some conclusions. As already mentioned on several occasions above, many, if not all, periodisations are more or less strongly influenced by the standard political division (phases A–E). Admittedly, the political periods often coincide with economic, social, cultural, and even literary ones, which may only reinforce the conviction that the history of the language must closely follow their lead too. However, language change requires time, so its direct correlation with political developments will more likely be the exception than the rule. However convenient other frameworks may be, language calls for separate treatment (see Calvetti 1999, pp. 2–3; Ōki 2018, pp. 24, 30–31 fn. 3; Hyakutome 2019, p. 55).

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<sup>6</sup> As observed by Sven Osterkamp, the year 1700 may be preferred not only for its roundness, but also because a small number of materials exhibit Eastern Japanese characteristics already in the seventeenth century, notably certain *shōmono* from the first half of this century and the *Zōhyō monogatari* 雑兵物語 of ca 1680, although the true literary production in Edo did not begin before the mid-eighteenth century (Sven Osterkamp, personal communication, 17 May and 8 September 2024).

If, then, the discussed periodisations lean excessively towards political and other divisions, everything that deviates from phases A–E must result from a different type of evidence – common sense tells us that this evidence is of a linguistic nature. It is thus tempting to propose a periodisation based exclusively on these deviations. The above meta-analysis suggests the following two divisions:

**Table 2. Two periodisation proposals based on linguistic evidence only**

Old Japanese		600/650–850/900	Old Japanese	
Classical Japanese	Early	850/900–1100	Classical Japanese	
	Late*	1100–1350/1400	Early	Middle Japanese
Middle Japanese		1350/1400–1700/1750	Late	
New Japanese		1700/1750–1900	New Japanese	
Modern Japanese	Early	1900–1950	Early	Modern Japanese
	Late	1950–	Late	

\* Note that unlike this table, Jens Riekmeyer (*Einführung in das Klassische Japanisch anhand der Gedichtanthologie «Hyakuniin isshu»* (fifth edition), München 2017 [first published in 1985], p. 13) divides his Classical Japanese into three sub-periods: *Früh-Klassischjapanisch* (800–950), *Hoch-Klassischjapanisch* (950–1050) and *Spät-Klassischjapanisch* (1050–1200). However, the years 950 and 1050 do not seem important enough to mark any particular caesuras. The same author also lists three sub-periods of Middle Japanese: *Früh-Mitteljapanisch* (1200–1400), *Hoch-Mitteljapanisch* (1400–1635) and *Spät-Mitteljapanisch* (1635–1750), and in this case at least the year 1400 is in agreement with the presented periodisation.

The periodisation on the left side of the table reflects the available linguistic material, which, for a certain time, documents the written language only, even though the spoken one was most probably already quite different. The periodisation on the right is a more theoretical construct, which takes into account this putative phase in the history of the spoken language (cf. K. Satō 1999, p. 10). As signalled at the beginning, in either case, the development of the official written language, interesting though it may be, is left aside. Not infrequently two dates separated by a slash mark are taken into consideration – one a round century and the other a half-century – but such hesitation seems unavoidable without undertaking further research into the actual linguistic changes, rather than relying solely on a meta-analysis. It must be stressed that the dates in the table are much more important than the terminology, which is somewhat subjective.

Finally, it can be concluded that, unusual as the above approach might seem, it has produced no absurd outcome. The division on the right bears a striking similarity to the scheme given by Narrog (2016, p. 250), as well as to the periodisation proposed by Schneider (1989), both of which were presented above – except for Schneider’s caesura around the year 1635 (which, when rounded up to 1650, could perhaps mark the beginning of the last sub-period of Middle Japanese, albeit exclusively for phonetic

reasons). All four divisions – those by Narrog and Schneider, and the two proposals put forward in Table 2 – differ in the thickness of some of the boundary lines (period vs sub-period) rather than in their location.

A great desideratum for the future is to draw up a list of diagnostic features that would enable the classification of a given text as belonging to a specific period. A tentative version could be compiled from the references cited in the present article.

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