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Changing ways of talking about the Ainu language?

A corpus-based analysis of Japan's National Diet discourse

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Abstract

Die Unterdrückung der Ainu-Rechte seit 1899 führte zu zunehmender Sprachassimilation und Sprachaufgabe. Die Gesetzesreformen von 1997 und 2019 bilden den Ausgangspunkt für eine diachronische Analyse von Aussagen aus parlamentarischen Debatten, die zentrale diskursive Veränderungen sichtbar macht. Durch die Kombination aus quantitativ-korpuslinguistischer und qualitativ-kritischer Diskursanalyse lassen sich vier Diskursphasen identifizieren: Kultureller Erhalt (vor 1996), Menschenrechtsmobilisierung (1997–2007), Symbolpolitik (2008–2018) und Förderung/Wiederbelebung (2019–2025). Die Ergebnisse machen den anhaltenden Mangel an sprachspezifischer parlamentarischer Auseinandersetzung sichtbar und zeigen Ansatzpunkte zur Verbesserung der Situation der Ainu-Sprache auf.

Keywords: Ainu, Ainu language, corpus linguistics, critical discourse analysis, National Diet, Kokkai

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1 Introduction: Ainu language legislation

Hinna Hinna – these are the words often used by the main character Asirpa in the 2018 adapted anime *Golden Kamuy,* sparking widespread usage of the expression among fans. However, the Ainu language, as leading researcher Nakagawa Hiroshi[1] and advisor for the show points out in an interview, "does not have any native speakers left anymore" (cf. Japan Times 2021).

According to multiple sources, the Ainu language is considered as either "dormant" (cf. Dougherty 2017: 100), "nearly extinct" (cf. Glottolog 2021), "endangered" (cf. Ethnologue 2025) or "critically endangered" (cf. Endangered Languages Project 2025). Optimistic estimates believe the number of remaining "native" speakers to be in the single digit realm, though the classification as a language that is merely used symbolically for heritage identity ("dormant" according to Lewis & Simons 2010) by the roughly 11,450 remaining ethnic Ainu people (cf. Hokkaidō Department of Environment and Lifestyle 2023: 2) seems most fitting.

The main reason for the Ainu language's endangerment and "death" is said to be the ideology of a "unified, one-ethnicity-state" after the Meiji Restoration in 1868 and subsequent decades, which positioned ethnic Japanese people above the indigenous Ainu population (Science Council of Japan 2011: 1). This led to the "Hokkaidō Former Aborigines Protection Act" of 1899, which sealed the fate of the Ainu people legally, resulting in the loss of habitable land, the prohibition of hunting and fishing practices, and mandatory education in the Japanese language – marking the start of linguistic assimilation (cf. Maruyama 2014: 155–157; Yoshida 2024: 97–99). After the end of the imperial ruling of Japan in 1945, policies concerning the Ainu were not adapted until 1997, when the "Ainu Culture Promotion Act" guaranteed "protection, promotion and expanding understanding of the Ainu language and culture" after massive pressure by the Ainu Association of Hokkaidō (Yoshida 2024: 99). Furthermore, the recognition of the Ainu people as indigenous to

[1] Japanese names will be given in the conventional order (last name first).

Japan followed in 2008, in the wake of the 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNRIP; Maruyama 2014: 164). Lastly, the "Ainu Policy Promotion Act" was enacted in 2019, which aimed to "realize a society in which the Ainu people can live with pride as a people" with regards to their "culture and traditions" (e-gov 2019; cf. Yoshida 2024: 101). Article 2 of both the 1997 Act (cf. e-gov 1997; Maruyama 2014: 162) and the 2019 policy define "Ainu culture" as "Ainu language, way of life, music, dance, crafts and other cultural products", which will be central for this study.

Research on Ainu language revitalisation has been undertaken plenty (cf. Ōno 2022; Kishimoto 2024; Santalahti & Ijas 2025; Nozaki 2021; etc.) and the focus on Ainu (language) policies has been prevalent (cf. Maruyama 2014; Hanks 2017; Yoshida 2024). Yet, none examined National Diet discourse. How is the Ainu language discussed in National Diet utterances, and what discursive shifts emerge? This study fills the gap using a mixed-methods approach of corpus linguistics (CL) and critical discourse analysis (CDA; cf. Section 4).[2]

2 Previous Ainu language policy and revitalisation research

Research on Ainu language policy and revitalization traces a shift from assimilation to tentative revival efforts. Up to the 2008 recognition of the Ainu as indigenous people, policies like the central 1899 and 1997 acts drove assimilation (cf. Heinrich 2013: 240–246), which Maruyama (2014) depicts and contrasts with Finnish Sámi approaches. Recent

[2] The Japanese law-making system sees the National Diet (国会 or Kokkai) as "the supreme and only body of the state", as defined by the constitution since 1947. The Lower House (House of Representatives) holds a "much stronger constitutional position" than the Upper House (House of Councillors), since any disagreement or split vote will result in the lower house's decision to be favoured. The prime minister is (usually) nominated and elected by the Lower House; bills or laws are mostly drafted and formulated by the cabinet or one of the ministers and their office. For "complicated issues", special advisory committees are consulted if "advice of specialists is necessary, in cases where neutrality is required, or when the reform is of major significance" (Oda 2021: 34–36).

critical reviews like Yoshida (2024) extend Ainu policy research to the 2019 act. From a legal perspective, the Ainu language faces challenges that prevent educational revitalisation. Among them, Ueno (2016: 241–242) raises low speaker proficiency, symbolic usage, and inadequate educational rights as concerns. Hanks (2017: 106) critiques Japan's reluctance in the context of "linguistic human rights" on a global scale, describing the "unwillingness of the Japanese Government" to support Ainu language rights.

Recent research thematising the Ainu language has seen a stronger focus on its revitalisation (cf. Ōno 2022: 406–414). Some revitalisation strategies address the assimilation-induced loss through extensive documentation of the language and the localisation of its greatly diminished speakers (Ōno 2022: 406–407; Kishimoto 2024: 166), museum exhibits at *Upopoy* incorporating Ainu descriptions (Satō 2021: 136–138; Ōno 2022: 433–434) and emerging "language nests", where the Ainu language can be studied more effectively in immersive environments (Nozaki 2021: 68–69). In Sapporo's contemporary linguistic landscape, however, the Ainu language primarily takes on "traditional" and "decorative" functions (Santalahti & Ijas 2025: 289–292).

3 Language policy theory

The methodological approach, particularly DHA in Section 4.2, draws on CDA and policy discourse theory (cf. Reisigl 2018; Reisigl & Wodak 2009; Fairclough 2013; Barakos 2016). Here, language policy theory provides key orientation: Spolsky's (2007) tripartite model of *practices*, *beliefs*, and *management* frames the analysis, focusing on the latter two for national-level language policies like Japan's Ainu acts.

National policies, per Spolsky (2009: 1) respond to "national/ethnic ideology", English' global role, "a nation's sociolinguistic situation" and linguistic rights. While Albury (2016: 367–369) sees this best suited to top-down management (in Iceland), Peled (2011: 449–451) adds an explicitly political perspective on the theoretical understanding of

language rights and language policy. Conceptualising language policy as constructed within political discourse is seen as crucial for this study's examination of National Diet proceedings, where policy management is negotiated in legislative debate. Building on this theoretical framework, the following section outlines the methodological approach, with a particular focus on CL and the DHA.

4 Methodological Considerations

The aim of this study is to combine corpus linguistics (CL) with critical discourse analysis (CDA) – specifically the discourse-historical approach (DHA; cf. Reisigl 2018; Reisigl & Wodak 2009). The goal is to "qualitatively interpret patterns" that were discovered during the quantitative analysis (Nartey & Mwinlaaru 2019: 205), which in turn can prevent problems in pure qualitative analysis like selection bias (cf. Baker *et al.* 2008: 275-276; Nartey & Mwinlaaru 2019: 204).

The collected dataset consists of transcribed utterances made during any regular diet session or committee since the adoption of the modern constitution of Japan (May of 1947; cf. Kokkai 2025a).[3] The provided API (cf. Kokkai 2025b, Kokkai 2025c) was used to code a Python script[4] to extract any utterance that includes either アイヌ文化 (*Ainu bunka*; "Ainu culture") or アイヌ語 (*Ainu-go*; "Ainu language"). Although the inclusion of "Ainu culture" as a keyword seems broad, the decision was made after closer inspection of the definition of "Ainu culture" in the legislations discussed in the introduction as being inclusive of "Ainu language" (cf. e-gov 1997/2019).

The extracted text data was cleaned up using Editpad Lite 8 to make it identifiable for the software used in the quantitative analysis, KH Coder 3 (cf. KH Coder 2001). The approach was inspired by Adachi (2022), who undertook similar measures to analyse co-occurrence

[3] This includes both the Upper and Lower House of the Diet.

[4] Python 3.13 was used for the coding and data extraction. The code was based on the example provided in the National Diet Library Proceedings Search System API Documentation (cf. Kokkai 2025c), and the full code is available upon request.

networks in the context of "Human Security" during the second Abe administration (cf. Adachi 2022). In total, 272,278 tokens, 8,503 types and 376 utterances in 39 separate years were extracted for the analysis.

4.1 Corpus Linguistics (CL)

Similarly to Khalid & Said (2023: 4–5) and Baker *et al.* (2008: 277–279), two main factors of CL are to be analysed: *Keyness* and *Collocation*. Keyness refers to the "statistically significantly higher frequency of particular words" in one dataset as compared to another (Baker *et al.* 2008: 278), which can be especially salient for discourse analysis (cf. Gries 2024: 78–79). Since KH Coder 3 does not offer keyness analysis internally, the dataset was manually divided and individual calculations of G^2 (also called log-likelihood value) and the Kullback-Leibler divergence (KLD) within the programming language R followed. G^2 was used for significance calculation, while KLD was preferred due to its avoidance of frequency biases and easier interpretation in comparison to G^2 (cf. Gries 2024: 68–149).

Collocation, more specifically co-occurrence networks, were calculated to show statistically significant words that co-occur with each other on the utterance level (cf. Baker *et al.* 2008: 278–279). This is helpful to "uncover ideological constructions and representations in text" (Khalid & Said 2023: 4), which further deepens the theoretical understanding of underlying power relations in policy discourse approaches (cf. Fairclough 2013; Barakos 2016) and language policy theory (cf. Spolsky 2007; Peled 2011; Albury 2016).

The co-occurrence networks in this study were calculated using KH Coder 3. Within the software, the co-occurrences ('edges') were filtered using the Top 60 edges with the highest Jaccard-coefficients, thereby limiting the network to the strongest term associations and improving interpretability (cf. Higuchi 2016: 51). The terms ('nodes') were subsequently clustered into subgraphs via modularity analysis. Relevance was seen as either showing high node frequency, centrality, or being intertwined already on the one hand (cf. Adachi 2022: 188), and being

thematically prevalent within qualitatively analysed segments on the other. Lastly, minimum term frequencies were adjusted based on the phase and verbs were excluded from all networks.

4.2 Critical Discourse Analysis: Discourse-historical approach (DHA)

CDA is used to make "the underlying ideologies" visible – usually through the analysis of lexical choices, expressions, or language in general (Nartey & Mwinlaaru 2019: 206). There are various branches of analytical approaches within CDA (cf. Khalid & Said 2023: 5), but DHAs triangulation and the strong emphasis on historical context (cf. Reisigl 2018: 45; Khalid & Said 2023: 6; Baker *et al*. 2008: 295–296) made the combination of both quantitative CL and qualitative CDA in the study design more appealing.

As a result, the discourse-historical approach as described by Reisigl (2018) and Reisigl & Wodak (2009) was used for the qualitative analysis and interpretation. Theoretically, the approach, and by extension this study, draws on the concepts of *critique*, *ideology*, and *power*. While critique is referring to a reflexive understanding of context, inconsistencies, and one's own position to transparently justify the analysis, ideology is seen as a certain world view "composed of opinions, attitudes […] and evaluations shared by members of a specific social group". Power is referring to an "asymmetric relationship among social actors", often with conflicting interests (Reisigl & Wodak 2009: 87–89). Here, the apparent rift within the discourse of the Japanese Diet is evident, as the utterances of (mostly) ethnic Japanese politicians are analysed in relation to the Ainu language and people.

For the qualitative analysis, the theoretical framework to analyse discursive strategies according to the DHA in five aspects will be operationalized. These aspects include nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivisation and mitigation/intensification (Reisigl & Wodak 2009: 95; Reisigl 2018: 52). KH Coder's "KWIC Concordance" feature was used to dive deeper into discourse strings, to elaborate on certain

key words (as established by the quantitative analysis) and to gain insight into the actual contextualisation of co-occurring words (cf. Khalid & Said 2023; Baker *et al.* 2008).

5 Analysis

The distribution of the 376 analysed utterances can be seen in Figure 1. The spikes in utterances around the years of policy enactment (1997 and 2019) can be traced back to the usual policy discussion circle, which sees policies commonly submitted (after internal deliberation) to the diet sessions at the start of the year with follow-up discussion by the start of the fiscal year in April (cf. Shinoda 2020).

The dataset was divided into four phases based on test analysis, frequency of utterances, and, most importantly, the discursively relevant historical context of the previously mentioned legislature and policy changes (cf. Reisigl 2018: 53). The first round of qualitative concordance analysis (KWIC) confirmed discourse strings to follow similar trends after key historical occasions (1997, 2008 and 2019), resulting in four phases (Table 1).

Tab. 1: Quantitative overview of the four phases

	period	**utterances**	**tokens**	**types**
Phase 1	pre-1996	42	9,421	3,028
Phase 2	1997–2007	111	24,469	4,128
Phase 3	2008–2018	49	10,994	1,856
Phase 4	2019–2025	174	67,060	4,445

Although unequal in length, the four phases reflect distinct discursive shifts linked to the political context and changing actors. Phases 1 and 3 are briefly summarised, while Phases 2 and 4 are examined in more detail. Each section follows a consistent structure: quantitative keyness and collocation analyses identify salient discursive patterns, followed by qualitative CDA zooming into selected National Diet debates to interpret these shifts in context.

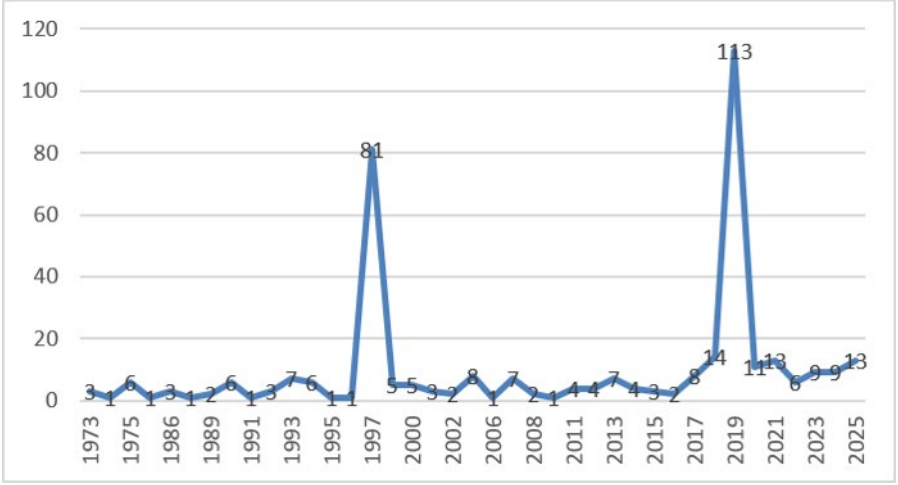

Fig. 1: Number of utterances including Ainu culture or Ainu language by year (1973–2025)

5.1 Phase 1 (pre-1996): Cultural preservation

Keyness analysis revealed distinct keywords for the discourse around Ainu language and culture that were statistically significantly more prevalent during this phase: 'cultural property', 'preservation', 'protection' and 'Ainu people'. The co-occurrence network showed two intertwined subgraphs around the terms 'Ainu' and 'Ainu culture'. Within the same subgraph, the strong collocation with the word 'problem' could also be determined.

The analysis suggests that central discourse actors argued for the preservation of the Ainu language in the context of cultural property. However, the lack of utterances thematizing Ainu language and culture (n=42) in this phase – especially considering the historical context of the Ainu's oppression and forced assimilation under the 1899 Hokkaidō Former Aborigines Protection Act (cf. Maruyama 2014) – suggests that the topic was avoided up until 1997.

5.2 Phase 2 (1997–2007): Legal rights mobilisation

After the enactment of the "Ainu Culture Promotion Act" (cf. e-gov 1997) in the spring of 1997, mentions of 'Ainu culture' and 'Ainu language' spiked (cf. Figure 1). Looking at key terms (Table 2), 'judgement', 'human rights', 'relief', 'knowledge', 'enlightenment' and 'tradition' show strong statistically significant keyness compared to other phases. However, the last four words can be omitted, as they are part of the legislature's name (cf. Figure 2) and lack discursive weight. Figure 2, generated via KH Coder's co-occurrence network analysis, visualizes top collocates of "Ainu culture/language" (Subgraph 08) alongside other emergent clusters within the phase. The Subgraphs represent statistically detected network modules and guide the selection for qualitative CDA below. Specifically, two discourse fragments are analysed: the 140th Diet session in 1997 (cf. Kokkai 1997) and the 156th session in 2003 (cf. Kokkai 2003). Both are characterized by a strong focus on human rights and discrimination (top keyness terms) in relation to Ainu culture and language, illustrating the connections between subgraph modules 01, 03 and 08.

In general, mentions of the Ainu language in 1997 mostly group it with "Ainu culture" and frame it as something that "needs to be promoted and further taught", for example through media or education system reforms. Apart from that, the Ainu language itself was not mentioned or used for argumentative perspectivisation, especially in the context of human rights or discrimination.

In the 140th session, Fukada Hajime (Social Democratic Party of Japan; SDP) presents a clear predication as the Ainu culture having been assimilated and the people being discriminated against. He re-frames "assimilation politics and discrimination" as "colonialisation policies" and invokes the 50th anniversary of the constitution to demand accounttability for the timing and content of the 1997 act from a pro-Ainu perspective[5].

[5] "憲法が施行されて五十年というこの記念することし、[…]" (096 Fukada Hajime, Paragraph 3) "[…] 私は、そのような差別や支配や同化政策は、いわゆる我々の知っている知識からいえば植民地政策だと思っているの

Tab. 2: Test results for keyness in Phase 2 (1997–2007)

	Jap.	Eng.	f_tar	f_ref	KLD	G^2
1	判決	Judgement	43	0	8.1955436	127.64209
2	北海道開発庁	Hokkaidō Regional Development Agency	50	4	5.4131350	121.96787
3	人権	Human Rights	145	18	4.7792629	326.79683
4	救済	Relief	49	8	4.3839887	103.33201
5	紹介	Introduction	99	21	4.0063180	193.50532
6	憲法	Constitution	61	19	3.4520887	103.15238
7	知識	Knowledge	46	16	3.2928408	73.96464
8	啓発	Enlightenment	58	21	3.2349424	91.48647
9	法律	Law	145	77	2.6824014	183.69096
10	伝統	Tradition	99	57	2.5657455	118.45583
11	アイヌ民族	Ainu People	122	104	1.9995765	103.87345
12	言う	to say	86	74	1.9860902	72.46171
13	質問	Question	45	41	1.9035799	35.61376
14	報告	Report	47	48	1.7389052	32.49723
15	長官	(Agency) Chief	46	47	1.7382520	31.78705

です。さあ、植民地政策だと言うと、[...] 私は、これは日本の恥じるべき植民地政策が歴史的にあったというふうに考えていることをこの際申し上げておきたいと思います。" (096 Fukuda Hajime, Paragraph 16).

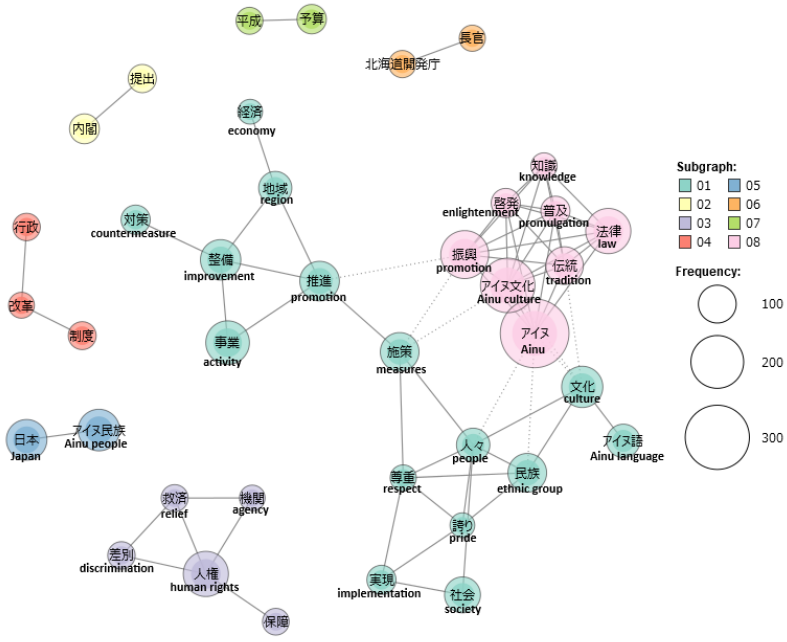

Fig. 2: Co-occurrence network of Phase 2 (1997–2007; Minimum Term Frequency=40)

In the 156th session (cf. Kokkai 2003), Akibe Tokuhei, a social movement leader and Ainu rights activist, started off by clearly stating the "missing pride"[6] of Ainu culture, further arguing that "Ainu land had been forcefully stolen and ruled", as well as claiming "the almost complete eradication of Ainu language and traditional culture"[7]. He specifically frames his "lack of Ainu language education", which his family "has not received

[6] "アイヌ民族にとって、誇りというものは現在全くなくなってしまうので […]" (002 Akibe Tokuhei, Paragraph 6).

[7] "アイヌモシリと呼ぶアイヌの居住地、これは非常に広大な領地でありました。豊富であった海産資源、鉱物資源、森林資源、動植物資源のほとんどを奪われてしまいました。もちろん、土地もすべて国有化されて、後に和人たちにこれが配られ、この土地もなくし、挙げ句の果てにアイヌ語を始め伝統文化もほとんど奪われてしまった状態にあります。" (002 Akibe Tokuhei, Paragraph 7).

since his grandparent generation, when assimilation started" as a "culture loss" and uses the performance of a short statement in the Ainu language to accentuate his argumentative stance[8]. After showing a poster that was printed shortly following the 1997 law enactment, he frames the "need to point out to respect the pride of the Ainu people" as "this pride not being there in the first place" and "marking the state of further beating down the Ainu culture"[9]. The first claim can be seen as logically sound from an argumentative point. However, despite historical accuracy in the context of long ignored Ainu rights, the second conclusion can be seen as a hyperbole, as the effort to increase respect for the Ainu does not automatically constitute a "beating down" on the status quo. In the context of international human rights and the Ainu law of 1997, he further argues for the revision of the latter to include "independent rights for the Ainu" and not the "sole focus on the culture" as is the status quo[10].

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[8] "このように日本語でしゃべっておりますけれども、私自身アイヌ語による教育は全く受けておりません。祖父母はアイヌ語を母語としておりましたけれども、明治政府以来、アイヌ語は事実上禁止されましたから、私の親もアイヌ語は話せませんでした。しかし最近、アイヌ語を復活しようという動きの中で、私も少しはアイヌ語を話すことができます。" "ごあいさつだけ手短にアイヌ語でさせていただきます。" (002 Akibe Tokuhei, Paragraph 11-12).

[9] "さて、アイヌ民族の誇りということでもう一つ資料を、これは皆さんには行っておりませんが、私、今日持ってまいりました。（資料を示す）[...] 日本政府は、一貫してアイヌ民族の存在を認めませんでした。しかし、九七年、平成九年にアイヌ文化振興法、おかげさまで成立をいたしました。その後、作られたポスターでございます。その標語が「アイヌ民族の誇りが尊重される社会を」と記されております。つまり、アイヌ民族の誇りは尊重されていないということになるわけであります。わざわざこういう標語を付けなければならないほどアイヌ文化、アイヌの誇りは今打ちのめされている状態にあるということが言えるかと思います。" (002 Akibe Tokuhei, Paragraph 20-21).

[10] "アイヌ民族の人権に関する法律というものが、今後も文化だけに偏ったアイヌ文化振興法、それを改正をしていただいて、アイヌ民族の自決権を含む、アイヌ民族の自決権というのはほかから許諾されるものではありません。当たり前の権利であります。この日本という国は、今こそアイヌを含む内なる国際化が急務である、そのためには法整備

These two discourse strings within this period offered multiple angles for analysis. Nomination of human rights and discrimination, as well as of the Ainu language and culture was seen from two pro-Ainu perspectives, while the discussion of Ainu language and culture from leading politicians (namely from the ruling LDP[11]) focused on the law and refrained from discussing the Ainu culture altogether if it was not the central topic of the session. Looking at the rapid extinction of the Ainu language, this predication of "loss of culture/language", combined with the lack of fundamental human rights for the Ainu and discrimination against them, becomes discursively prominent in this period.

5.3 Phase 3 (2008–2018): Symbolic politics?

The recognition of the Ainu people as indigenous people of Japan in 2008 marks Phase 3, where key terms such as 'symbol', 'space' or 'museum' show an additionally strong collocation. After both houses of the National Diet unanimously adopted the 2007 UNRIP in 2008, the proposal to create a "space that symbolizes symbiosis with the people" was made in 2009 and decided on in 2014. The official opening of the *Upopoy* happened in 2020 and was originally supposed to coincide with the opening of the Tokyo Olympic Games. Said *Upopoy* is a national museum predicated as the aforementioned "symbolic space for the Ainu culture" (cf. Upopoy 2025) that, according to then Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga Yoshihide, will function "as a great way to show off the indigenous Ainu people of Japan to many international eyes".

Qualitative analysis in Phase 3 suggests that the nominated "Ainu problem" centres on the construction of the *Upopoy*, which, in critical terms, represents symbolic politics. The language, again subsumed as merely a part of the Ainu culture, found little to no attention – even after

はどうしても必要ではないのかというふうに考えております。" (002 Akibe Tokuhei, Paragraph 36).

[11] Liberal Democratic Party; has been the ruling party of Japan almost consistently since 1955 (except from 1993–1996 and 2009-2012); follows a conservative, nationalistic, right-wing ideology (depending on source; cf. Coulmas 2023: 88)

the official recognition of the Ainu as indigenous to Japan and UNESCO's classification of the Ainu language as "critically endangered".

Tab. 3: Test results for keyness in Phase 4 (2019–2025)

	Jap.	Eng.	f_tar	f_ref	KLD	G^2
1	ウポポイ	Upopoy	140	0	7.635044	150.32159
2	コロナ	Corona	112	0	7.313116	120.23903
3	安心	Safety	169	6	4.321678	139.75220
4	社会	Society	419	30	3.309677	282.82036
5	分野	Field	237	19	3.146576	152.55898
6	拡大	Expansion	141	12	3.060350	88.34102
7	管理	Management	141	14	2.837957	81.96121
8	取組	Effort	319	34	2.735711	178.71929
9	持続	Continuation	137	15	2.696902	75.49467
10	物流	Logistics	135	16	2.582576	70.97431
11	インフラ	Infrastructure	265	32	2.555609	137.84848
12	防災	Disaster Prevention	183	23	2.497899	92.73014
13	着実	Steady	157	21	2.408064	76.27728
14	充実	Completeness	104	20	1.884272	37.21048
15	確保	Securing	464	93	1.824583	159.51726

5.4 Phase 4 (2019–2025): "Promotion" and "revival"?

After the 2019 Ainu Policy Promotion Act, utterances in the Diet spiked again, forming the largest dataset out of the four phases. Key terms (cf. Table 3) include 'Upopoy', 'Corona' and 'continuation', though their relevance for the discourse around Ainu culture and language was either mentioned previously (*Upopoy*) or negligible. Excluding the two legislation names (cf. e-gov 1997 & 2019), 'promotion' remains a high frequency term linked to Ainu culture and language (cf. Figure 3; Subgraph 08). However, 'Ainu language' was only successfully extracted 51 times,

concentrated in two discourse fragments. The qualitative analysis therefore focuses on one of the two fragments, namely the 204th session of the House of Councillors from the 19th of April 2021 (cf. Kokkai 2021).

In this debate, Kami Tomoko (Japanese Communist Party; JCP) and Chief Cabinet Secretary Katō Katsunobu (LDP), assisted by Agency of Cultural Affairs official Dekura Kōichi, discuss "the Ainu language problem", as framed by Kami, and how the government plans to tackle it for the upcoming fiscal year[12]. Kami predicates one problem of the Ainu language as "lacking succession" and, citing UNESCO classifications, asks whether Katō recognises "the extreme danger the Ainu language is in"[13].

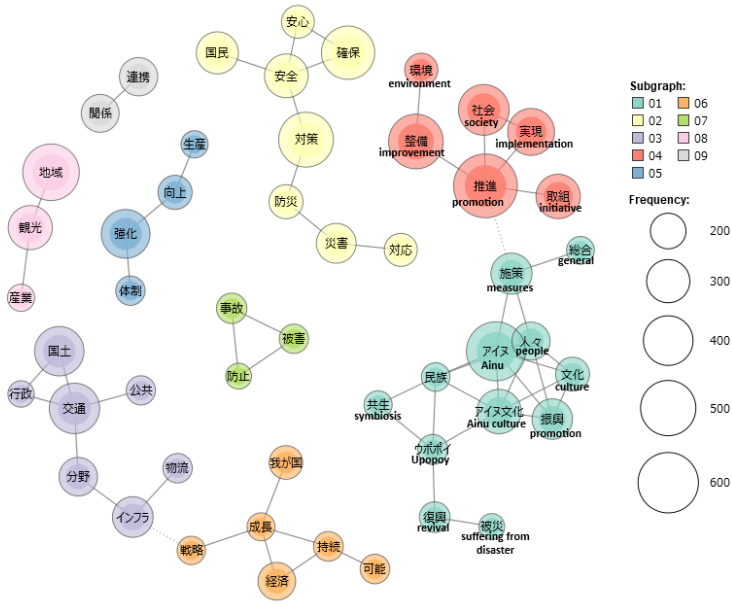

Fig. 3: Co-occurrence network of Phase 4 (2019–2025; Minimum Term Frequency=100)

[12] "そこで、アイヌ語の問題で、このアイヌ語をどう継承するかというのが一つ課題になっております。" (201 Kami Tomoko, Paragraph 3)

[13] "官房長官は、今ちょっと説明ありましたけれども、アイヌ語は消滅の危機にある言語だと、こういう御認識でおられるでしょうか。" (203 Kami Tomoko, Paragraph 1)

His response, which referred to the Ainu/Utari Association and its rebranding (cf. Kamui Mintara 2009), can be seen as a deflection strategy, because he nominates "the Ainu people" directly and references their "hard work to pass on their culture and traditions" and only says that "it will be difficult to pass on their culture unless we make an effort"[14]. The grouping of Ainu language with culture, though important, leads to the negligence of both the language itself and acknowledgement of its critical status.

Upon Kamis request, Dekura reports that only five out of the 671 people surveyed "could converse" in Ainu and that no data on native speakers exists. The Ainu language is "confirmed as being positioned as a language that is in danger of extinction" (cf. Hokkaidō Department of Environment and Lifestyle 2017)[15]. He notes that over 5 million Yen "will be allocated to the Ainu language education infrastructure" in order to "establish effective teaching and learning methods for the Ainu language"[16].

Kami contrasts this with the need for immersive learning ("living in the homes of speakers"; see also Nozaki 2021) and compares the situation unfavourably to English[17]. Katō's response, in which he states that

[14] "アイヌの歴史、あるいは、例えばアイヌ協会という言葉、今アイヌ協会ですけれども、いっときはアイヌという言葉を使えずにウタリ協会という、そうした本当に厳しい状況の中で、そのアイヌの皆さん方が自分たちの文化あるいは伝統というものを一生懸命継承されてきたと。逆に言えば、それだけの努力を払っていかなければなかなか継承できない、そういう状況にあるというふうに認識をしております。" (204 Katō Katsunobu, Paragraph 1)

[15] "アイヌ語の会話ができると回答した方は、この調査対象六百七十一人のうち五人[…] このアイヌ語が存続の危機にあると位置付けられたものと認識をしてございます。" (206 Dekura Kōichi, Paragraph 3-4)

[16] "[…] 令和三年度から、先ほど申しました財団におきまして新たに五百二十八万円を計上いたしまして、アイヌ語の効果的、効率的な教育方法とか学習法の確立を目指すアイヌ語教育基盤整備事業、これに取り組むことにしてございまして、[…]" (210 Dekura Kōichi, Paragraph 1)

[17] "例えば英語なんかの場合も、学校教育で学んだとしても日常生活の中ですぐ生かせるかというと、そう簡単ではないのが実態だと思うんで

he is "not necessarily familiar with each and every detail", focuses on an appeal to authority, which can be seen as an informal fallacy in his argumentation. He highlights Ainu policies "securing 2 billion Yen last year", alongside government projects promoting "culture, regions, industry and community activities"[18]. Additionally, his vagueness (which can be equally seen as a deflection strategy) is called out by Kami, calling it "necessary to pinpoint these areas, make plans and provide more support", as "there will be no one to teach them the language" should it stay vague[19]. Katō counters by shifting the blame onto local actors: The national government will "create basic guidelines" and "municipalities will create regional plans" to "promote" them[20].

すね。アイヌの方は、このアイヌ語を日常会話で身に付けるために、話者の家に住み込んで一緒に生活して身に付けようということで、そうやってアイヌ語を伝承しようということで、継承しようということで努力をされているんですよね。" (211 Kami Tomoko, Paragraph 1)

18 "ちょっと一つ一つの具体的な話を必ずしも承知しているわけではありませんけれども、国としては、アイヌ政策推進交付金をつくらさせていただいて、令和三年度予算では二十億円を確保し、文化振興事業、地域・産業振興事業、コミュニティー活動支援事業と、こういった施策を、これは市町村が計画を国に申請し、国が認定し、認定を受けた計画に基づき事業に対して交付金を交付する、こういったことを実施をさせていただいているところであります。" (212 Katō Katsunobu, Paragraph 1)

19 "ちょっと今全体の話だったんですけど、かなり具体的で、やっぱり住み込んでやるんだけど、身に付ける人がいなくなってしまうからやっぱりつなごうということでの努力なので、こういうところにちゃんとピンポイントでというか、そういう計画を作って、そういう支援も踏み込んでやる必要あるんじゃないのかなというふうに思うんですよ。" (213 Kami Tomoko, Paragraph 1)

20 "御指摘の趣旨、まずアイヌ施策推進法、これにのっとりながら、国が基本方針を作り、また市町村においてアイヌ政策推進地域計画を作成していただく、こういうスキームになっているわけでありまして、また、それを推進するための予算として、先ほど申し上げたアイヌ政策推進交付金と、こういったものも予算措置をさせていただいております。" (214 Katō Katsunobu, Paragraph 1)

Overall, the Ainu language remains quantitatively underrepresented, as it is subsumed under "Ainu culture" in the 2019 act. The analysed fragment showed argumentative fallacies by the governing politician that were partially identified and called out by the representative of the Communist Party of Japan, arguing for more support of the Ainu people and their language (especially considering the effort to revive it). The urgency, which Kami expressed from a pro-Ainu language rights perspective, symbolizes what has been missing in the phases prior.

6 Discussion and Limitations

The combinatory approach of CL and CDA undertaken confirmed a diachronic shift from "cultural preservation" before 1996 to "human rights mobilisation" in the period after the 1997 Act (1997–2007). Yet gaps persist, such as the lack of a formal apology during law-making process and the exclusion of human rights (such as fishing traditions; cf. Maruyama 2014: 162; Albury 2016). Moreover, discourse around Ainu culture/language was mostly confined to the policymaking circle, where debates arise by legislative necessity, not volition (cf. Shinoda 2020). Ruling LDP speakers largely avoided the topic outside enactment debates. Perspectivation and argumentation strategies were employed predominantly by pro-Ainu voices, while government actors remained comparatively cautious, which accentuates the power imbalance in discourse construction.

The recognition of the Ainu as indigenous people in 2008 (Phase 3) neither increased the volume of Diet discourse quantitatively nor altered the legal situation of the Ainu people in Japan (cf. Maruyama 2014: 164–165). Since Japan did not intend to fully implement the UNRIP, the 1997 Act effectively "remained the only legislation for the Ainu", reducing pressure on the Diet to revisit the topic (Maruyama 2014: 164–165; Yoshida 2024: 101–102). References to the *Upopoy* predicated it as a "symbolic space" to "show the Ainu to the world" amidst the 2020 Tokyo

Olympics, therefore functioning more as symbolic politics. The potential for the *Upopoy* to be seen as an initiative for substantive language revitalisation (Satō 2021: 136–138) was not realised.

Phase 4 is characterised by "promotion" and "revival" after the 2019 Ainu Policy Promotion Act. However, the main discourse string shows an LDP politician responding to Kami Tomoko's concrete Ainu language revitalisation demands. Kami Tomoko argued for concrete measures to aid where it is most needed. As an example, she points to "language nests" – a revitalisation strategy that was also seen as potentially beneficial in the Ainu language context (cf. Nozaki 2021). Although "revival" was prevalent in the general discourse of the Ainu language as early as in the 1970ies (cf. Maruyama 2014), the co-occurrence networks of Phase 3 and 4 showed centrality of the term within discourses. The need for "revival" highlights how earlier neglect has made revival necessary in the first place. Whether ongoing revitalisation efforts (cf. Santalahti & Ijas 2025; Ōno 2022; Kishimoto 2024) will match the discursive focus on "promotion" of the Ainu language going forward remains an open question.

Across all phases, awareness of the Ainu language's critical endangerment was prevalent yet mostly not translated into concrete policy discourse. Analysis of perspective (cf. Reisigl 2018; Reisigl & Wodak 2009) shows that explicit calls for more (linguistic and human) rights of the Ainu come mainly from left-leaning politicians, experts, and activists. From a language policy theory perspective (Albury 2016; Spolsky 2007, 2009), the LDP-led government appears ideologically conservative. It symbolically foregrounds the Ainu (e.g. via Suga for promotion of the *Upopoy* around the Olympics in Phase 3) while, in practice, refraining from discussing the topic elsewhere. Furthermore, it relies on vague references to existing measures and achievements (as seen in Katō's response in Phase 4) rather than pinpointing where language-focused support is most needed.

This study has several limitations. First, despite frequent discursive parity of (Ainu) language and (Ainu) culture, there are few utterances where the language itself is the main or sole focus. Second, the combination of corpus linguistics and critical discourse analysis was applied

in an exploratory fashion since no prior research has been solely focusing on National Diet discourse. A fuller exploitation of the mixed-method approach (as proposed by Baker et al. 2008; Nartey & Mwinlaaru 2019; Khalid & Fathi 2023) remains as an open end for future research.

7 Conclusion

This study analysed 376 National Diet utterances from 1973 to 2025 using a combined corpus-linguistic and discourse-historical CDA approach to trace diachronic changes in the discussion of the Ainu language and culture. The analysis identified four phases. The pre-1996 discourse (Phase 1) revolved around cultural preservation of the Ainu. After the 1997 Act (Phase 2: 1997–2007), the discourse centred on the human and linguistic/cultural rights, as well as the legal position of the Ainu. After the 2008 recognition of the Ainu as indigenous (Phase 3: 2008–2018), the discourse was dominated by symbolic politics around the planned Ainu national museum *Upopoy*. After the 2019 Act (Phase 4: 2019–2025), the framing shifted to "promotion" and "revival". The quantitative spikes in utterances align with policy enactment across all phases, while the qualitative analysis highlights that substantive, language-specific concerns are voiced mainly by left-leaning politicians and activists.

A core finding for Ainu language revitalisation is the persistent lack of language-specific debate in the National Diet. The diachronic shift revealed facets of the diet proceedings that could aid in bettering the language's future – through explicit language rights in legislation, targeted funding for revitalisation projects (such as language nests) and greater public visibility. Concrete support for bottom-up efforts – not just Golden Kamuy media exposure – is urgently needed. Parliamentary practice must adapt to save a language on the brink of extinction.

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