

IN MEMORIAM: PROF. DR. KEIKO MITANI

On January 17, 2022, Dr. Keiko Mitani, professor of the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, Graduate School of Humanities and Sociology, the University of Tokyo, suddenly and unexpectedly passed away at the age of 64 due to hepatocellular carcinoma. With her passing, the Japanese Slavist community lost an outstanding and eminent scholar who was a keen observer of the Slavic languages, a great and respected teacher with extensive knowledge of Slavic languages and cultures, a celebrated author of numerous textbooks and handbooks, a skilled translator, a leading member and facilitator of our community, and a beloved colleague with a big and kind heart.

Prof. Mitani started her academic training with her B.A. degree from the University of Tokyo in 1981, followed by an M.A. degree from the same institution in 1983. She received her first Ph.D. for her dissertation “Verbal Aspect in Serbian or Croatian” (*Glagolski vid u hrvatskom ili srpskom jeziku*) from the University of Zagreb in 1988, and the second Ph.D. for her other dissertation “Study on the Structure and Function of Noun Phrases in Russian: Definiteness, indefiniteness, and anaphor of noun phrases in the utterance” (*Roshiago ni okeru meishiku no kōzō to kinō no kenkyū: Hatsuwa no naka no meishiku no tei, hutei, shōō*) from the University of Tokyo in 1992.

Her professional career began at the former Department of Russian Language and Literature (the present-day Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures), Faculty of Letters, at the University of Tokyo where she worked as an assistant from 1990 to 1993. From 1993 to 1999 she taught at the College of Humanities, University of Tsukuba as a lecturer (1993–1997), and later as an associate professor (1997–1999). In 1999, she started her work as an associate professor at the Graduate School of Human and Environmental Studies, Kyoto University. After being promoted as a professor in 2005, she continued teaching and supervising her students in Kyoto University until March 2013. In April 2013, she moved back to her alma mater, the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, Graduate School of Humanities and Sociology, the University of Tokyo, where she worked until the last day of her life.

Besides her jobs at universities, she constantly and actively participated in both domestic and international conferences and scientific projects. She was also a great organizer and lead a range of scientific projects such as “Linguistic analysis of Croatian and Bosnian Medieval Texts and their Significance in South Slavic Language Culture” (2000–2002), “Study of South Slavic Languages: Historical Aspects and Cultural Background in the 14–15th Centuries” (2003–2005), “Media, Languages and Identity in Former Yugoslavia” (2006–2009), “Studies on Language Maintenance and Language Change” (2011–2014), “Study on Language Situations of Bosnia as a Multilingual Space” (2015–2018), “Study on the History of the South Slavic Languages: Through the Analysis of Semi-secular Texts” (2019–2022), etc., and was a member of many domestic scientific projects from the fields of theoretical linguistics, Slavic linguistics, legal science and legal history, and Slavic literature and culture.

She also made significant contributions to advancing and upholding the level of Slavic and Eurasian studies in Japan. She was a member of the board of directors of the Japan Association for East European and Russian Studies (2015–2018), the chair-

person of the planning and editorial committee at the Japan Society for the Study of Slavic Languages and Literatures (2019–2021), and the president of the Japanese Association for the Study of Russian Language and Literature (2017–2021). Under her auspices, a number of panel sessions and conferences were organized and conducted which involved both Japanese and international scholars.

Throughout her career, she has been working on a wide range of issues in the synchronic study of the Slavic languages, especially Russian, Serbian, Croatian and Slovene. In the early years of her career, she strenuously worked on issues such as the infinitive construction, the existential sentences, the anaphoric function of demonstratives, pronouns, and numerals, the semantics of the modal predicates, motion verbs, and verbal aspect from the theoretical and typological perspective. From the earliest years of her career, she was also interested in so-called Slavic literary micro-languages and diaspora languages such as Upper and Lower Sorbian, Burgenland Croatian, Moravian Croatian, and Rusyn, and introduced the history of their formation and development, and their present-day linguistic situation, as well as sociolinguistic topics to Japanese readers. It often happens that Japanese students of Slavic studies get to know about these “small” languages for the first time through her translations, scientific articles, and books, and get interested in them academically. Besides that, she also focused some of her attention on the questions of language independence and standardization of the languages in the former Yugoslavian countries, and the initial results of her research were published in the scientific articles and textbooks.

Prof. Mitani’s research interests were not limited to the studies of synchronic linguistics. It is even possible to say that she emphasized on importance of the diachronic studies. One of her main research tasks was to reveal the process of changes and developments of Slavic languages starting from Common Slavic within the framework of traditional philology. Indeed, her academic works include, for example, the comparative syntax of Slavic languages based on medieval Slavic law texts, diachronic language change in the structure of the South Slavic languages, and so on. Furthermore, she analyzed medieval texts not only from a purely linguistic perspective but also attempted to combine the other methods/disciplines such as contrastive textology and translation studies. She made detailed analyses of linguistic features observed in medieval apocryphal texts while dealing with the various recensions and copies of a variety of texts that circulated in the Medieval Christian Slavic world, and by doing so, she clarified the nature and characteristics of the texts themselves as well as the relationships between them. Based on these analyses, she examined the process of text propagation and transformation as well. Such studies have a long tradition of research in Europe, and it requires extremely wide-ranging knowledge. However, Prof. Mitani, while maintaining a philologist’s stance of reading texts carefully and steadily, despite the disadvantages of the research environment in Japan, made profound achievements in the field of medieval Slavic philology. In addition, she also undertook comparative research on the formation of legal language in the 19th century South Slavic region and Japan through joint projects with researchers in legal science and legal history.

As mentioned above, although she has made many academic research achievements with her unparalleled ability as a linguist and philologist, she also had another face as a literary translator. She introduced some authors of former Yugoslavian literature to Japanese readers. Her translation works include, “Balkan Express: Fragments from the Other Side of the War” (*Balkan Express: Fragmenti s druge strane rata*) by Slavenka Drakulić, and “Death and the Dervish” (*Derviš i smrt*) by Meša Selimović. Besides these, she translated two literary works by Milorad Pavić. One is “Last Love in Constantinople” (*Poslednja ljubav u Carigradu*), in which concise explanatory

comments along with some interesting personal exchanges with the author are attached. The other one that comprises Pavić's 16 short stories is entitled in Japanese as "The Sixteen Dream Stories: M. Pavić's illusion short stories," which was published several months before her death. Probably, the strong affection for literature, especially that of Former Yugoslavia, made it possible for her to complete this last translation despite, as far as we can assume, being terminally ill.

Prof. Mitani was also a prolific educator. By publishing books for novices, she contributed to educating the general public in Japan. There are two major groups of publications, all of which reflect the deep knowledge of her research field and her long-term educational experiences.

The first group of publications is concerned with the Croatian language. "The Handbook of Croatian" was probably one of the first books in Japan that specialized in Croatian as an independent language after the collapse of Yugoslavia. The book is more than a simple textbook for language learning. It contains detailed and systematic descriptions of the language structure of Croatian supported by expert knowledge, and thus it can be used as a handy reference grammar book as well. In addition, by publishing the lexicon "6000 commonly used words in Croatian," which functions as a small dictionary that provides the essential vocabulary, as well as the essay style book "The Mechanism of Croatian," which explains the mechanism of Croatian in a simple way, she has laid the foundation for Croatian language learning in Japan.

The second group includes introductory books on Slavic languages in general. Although "The Slavonic languages: A Primary Guide" is compact, it contains all the information necessary for understanding the modern Slavic languages, including those that had not been introduced widely in Japan, such as Kashubian, Sorbian, Montenegrin and Rusyn. Also, the book includes a chapter entitled "Slavic Languages and Modern Society," which concerns the sociolinguistic topics of the Slavic languages that were little known in Japan. Although it is labeled as a primary guide, it should be regarded as a specialized book to get an overview of Slavic linguistics in general. A few years later, another book called "Mechanism of Slavic languages in comparison" was published. It explains in a concrete and easy-to-understand manner the similarities and differences among the Slavic languages. The way they are explained makes you feel as if you were listening to her lecture in class, very different from a book-reading experience. In addition, Prof. Mitani participated in the editorial board of the recently published "Cultural Encyclopedia of Central and Eastern Europe." In the encyclopedia, she also has written some articles related to her specialties such as "The languages and countries of Eastern Europe," "Minority languages in Eastern Europe," and "The Balkan languages and the South Slavonic languages." Besides, "Dictionary of Sorbian" is another noteworthy work of hers for being the first and the only Sorbian dictionary in Japan, which contains 17,000 words and an adequate amount of grammatical information. The large number of publications for the general public in Japan is clear evidence of the fact that she was also focusing on introducing research results to the general public and fostering future scholars in this field throughout her career.

Prof. Mitani also looked after younger generations like us. She maintained a hands-off policy and did not interfere with what we do but by constantly showing us her own attitude toward research, she taught us how to behave and work as proper researchers. At the same time, she actively accepted the role of debater and panelist in discussions, and she always gave us accurate and incisive comments on our research. Also, when she attended gatherings after academic events, she talked to everyone, including graduate students, in a friendly manner, which was a truly good opportunity for us to have casual and light-hearted discussion of our own re-

search with her. We were extremely fortunate that we could be under her tutelage, although for a short period.

Taking a look at her achievements once again, it is truly fascinating to see that her fields of research and subjects are so wide-ranging. At the same time, it seems that she had a particularly deep love for the language and culture of the former Yugoslavia where she once studied. We can only imagine how much she would have wanted to continue pursuing what she had been doing so far. When we think that she would have led research in the Slavic studies and guided us forwards, it is not only a big loss for the academic society of Slavic language and culture in Japan but also in the world. As such, we need to renew our determination to develop the Slavic studies, to which Prof. Mitani devoted her life. We will always carry her in our hearts.

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