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Semiotic Structure of Traditional Japanese Rural Space: Hagikura Village, Suwa Basin

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the semiotic structure of rural space in a traditional Japanese village, with an economic base of agriculture and forestry, mainly before the end of the country's era of rapid economic growth. This examination defines the interrelationships among the domains of spatial classifications within the village: social space, land-use zones, folk taxonomy, places, village boundaries, symbolic space, and orientation. An abstract system of relationships can be regarded as the spatial deep structure (*langue*), in contrast to the surface-level structure of rural landscape (*parole*).

Keywords: rural space, folk classification, semiotics of space, landscape as sign, Suwa Basin

Introduction

A semiotic perspective regards the settlement space of cities and villages as a system of signs composed of landscape and its spatial elements (Brunet 1974:123; Foote 1985:160). Mainly in French, Italian, and English speaking countries, a number of semiotic scholars have discussed such settlement spaces (Foote 1985; Gottdiener and Lagopoulos 1986; Lagopoulos 1994).

A considerable number of studies have also examined the following semiotic elements of landscape and space in African, Asian, and Native American villages: social space (Evans-Pritchard 1969:113-117; Lévi-Strauss 1958:113-180; Tuan 1977:113-116); land folk taxonomy (Conklin 1967; Ohnuki-Tierney 1972:427-434); orientation and boundaries (Lagopoulos 1972; Ohnuki-Tierney 1972:439-445; Tuan 1974:13-29, 1977:118-135); and symbolic space (Needham 1962; Lagopoulos 1972; Tuan 1974:141-149). These studies mainly clarified the classifications and the cosmology of the villagers' living space.

However, as Yagi (1988a:64-65) pointed out in studies of Japanese village spaces, an important question remains unresolved: although scholars have intensively discussed each domain such as social space, land-use zones, folk taxonomy, places, orientation, village boundaries, and symbolic space, the interrelationships among these domains and their synthesis have not been sufficiently examined.

Traditional Japanese villages can be regarded as native Asian villages. Since the 1950s, the Japanese social sciences have taken up spatial semantic theories of Japanese villages with great controversy in such fields as folklore, cultural anthropology, human geography, history, religious studies, rural sociology, and architecture (Yagi 1998:7-18; Ichikawa 2001:9-41; Suzuki 2004:13-21; Imazato 2006:15-44). More recently, in the 1970s and 80s, French semiotics flourished in the humanities and social science departments of Japanese universities. In this context, some geographical studies tried to establish semiotic theories on such settlement spaces as ancient cities and villages (Senda 1980, 1982), historical landscapes (Suizu 1982, 1984), and religious places in villages (Shimazu 1989; Matsuoka

1992; Ohshiro 1992). However, these spatial semantic studies, as mentioned above, have tended to lack the perspective and logic needed to synthesize the domains of village landscape and space (Yagi 1988a:64-65; Imazato 2006:99).

Keeping such drawbacks in mind, this paper reveals the interrelationships among the spatial domains by introducing a semiotic theory of space, using as a case study the village of Hagikura in central Japan. Various methods and materials were used to pursue this aim: interviews, observations of landscapes and rituals, analysis of cadasters, cadastral maps, and local topographies.

Hagikura, a settlement reclaimed (*shinden-syuraku*) at the end of the seventeenth century, stands on a river terrace near Lake Suwa in Nagano Prefecture (Figures 1 and 2). It is now a mixed settlement composed of local farmers and newcomers who have arrived from the towns and villages along Lake Suwa since the end of Japan's rapid economic growth. In 1965, the village had only 65 households with a population of 275; by 1998, when the author did his fieldwork, the number of families had increased to 124 with a population of 408.

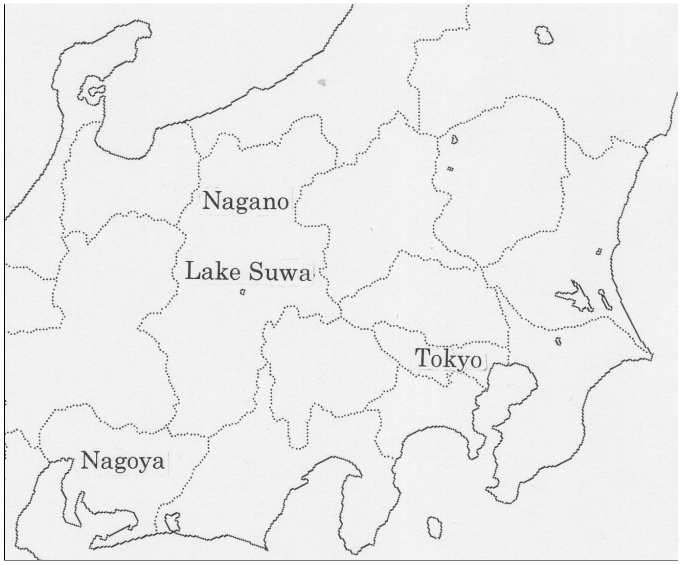

Figure 1. Study area

Hagikura's economy used to be dominated by the farming of rice, wheat, mulberries, potatoes, beans, and other vegetables. Raising silkworms, as well as forestry in the Imperial Forest east of the village, was also important. In recent times, most farmers have also commuted to the bigger towns along Lake Suwa to work in factories or offices.

This paper mainly examines the era before the end of the rapid economic growth in the 1970s, during which most people were engaged in the above agricultural and forestry work. However, most of the spatial classifications examined in this paper remain in use to this day.

Figure 2. Settlement landscape of Hagikura village
Source: Author's photo

Social space, land-use zones, and folk taxonomy

Generally speaking, in Japanese traditional villages, residents recognized that the entire territory of the village was divided into the following three zones of land use: *mura* (settlement or residential zone), *nora* (farmland), and *yama* (hill) (Fukuta 1980:222). These basic divisions can also be observed in Hagikura (Table 1, Figure 3).

Within the settlement zone of a Japanese village, the basic community is typically subdivided into ranks of subgroups (Yamano 1977:415-417). The settlement zone of Hagikura followed such a classification system of social space with the following four ranks: *kumi* (dual organizations), *tou-nakama* (mutual-aid groups), *han* (neighborhood groups), and *ie* (households). The two dual organizations were called the *wade* (upstream in the main river of *Ohkawa*) and *shimo* (downstream), which were units for fire prevention and fighting, selection of temple parishioner leaders, and so on. These dual organizations were each further classified into two mutual-aid groups, whose main responsibilities included funerals and preparing graves. Each of these groups was subdivided into two neighborhood groups. These eight neighborhood groups within the village were named by number (Group No. 1, No. 2, …No. 8).

In the farmland, the folk taxonomy consisted of the following four ranks: sub-zone, block, minor place, and patch. Each land-use zone was classified into sub-zones that had specific functions: residential, ritual, and vegetation (Table 1). These sub-zones were composed of blocks labeled with their own names. The names of such blocks (generally called *koaza*) were also registered in the cadasters of the town government for the collection of taxes. These were subdivided into minor places labeled with names that indicated smaller zones or specific points (Table 2). Such places were further classified into patches or sets of patches with folk names used only within each household.

Table 1. Upper ranks in folk taxonomy of subsistence space in Hagikura

	Rank 1 Land-use zone	Rank 2 Sub-zone	Rank 3 Lower sub-zone	Main land use or vegetation
1	*Mura* (Settlement)	–	–	Houses, vegetables, ritual
2	*Nora* (Farmland)	*Kage* (Behind fields)	–	Rice, wheat, mulberries
3		Covered category of a river	–	Irrigation
4		*Ideira* (Living plateau)	–	Rice, mulberries, vegetables
5		*Ohkawa* (Main river)	–	Irrigation, washing, fishing
6		*Mukei* (Opposite side)	–	Mulberries, wheat, rice, potatoes
7	*Yama* (Hill)	Covered category of hills	–	Grass
8		*Kageyama* (Back of the hill)	–	Grass, firewood
9		*O'ne-no-saka* (Ridge's slope)	–	Mushrooms
10		*Urayama* (Back hills)	Covered category	Firewood, lumber, mulberries
11			*Gobayashi* (Common hill)	Ritual, firewood, mushrooms
12			*Oyama* (Holy hill)	Ritual, mushrooms, bamboo
13		*Haba-no-yama* (Cliffs of a hill)	–	Climate adjustment, bamboo
14		*Mukouyama* (Opposite hills)	–	Grass, firewood, wild plants
15		*Okuyama* (Mountain depths)	*O'heishi* (Imperial Forest)	Firewood, lumber, wild nuts
16			*Yashima* (Highland)	Grass

Note: Each number corresponds to a number in Figure 3. [–] means that it is not classified.
Source: Author's fieldwork.

In the hill zone, the ranking system was somewhat different from that of the farmland: sub-zone, lower sub-zone, block, and minor place (Tables 1 and 2). This shows that the classification of farmland was more detailed than in the hills. If separated and noncontiguous farmlands existed within the hill zone, their ranking system was the same as that used in the farmland zone.

In short, as subcategories of land-use zones, the social space system classified the settlement landscape into every single house, while the folk taxonomy system classified the landscapes of farmland and hills into minute patches or wider places. These domains of social space, land-use zone, and folk taxonomy of space can be considered to function on the same dimension of spatial classification, although until now they have been regarded as different domains by scholars. They should be regarded as a combined single classification system of 'subsistence space' that consists of six levels from zero to five (Figure 4).

Table 2. Lower ranks in folk taxonomy of subsistence space: one household

	Rank 2 Sub-zone	Rank 3 Block	Rank 4 Minor place	Rank 5 Patch
2	*Kage* (Behind fields)	*Machiyashiki* (Plateau of waiting hut)	*Machiyashiki-no-ta* (Machiyashiki paddies)	*Kobbo-ta* (Small paddy field) *Oh-ta* (Large paddy field) *Maide-sanmai* (Front three patches)
			Itagasawa (Paddies along wooden board brook)	–
4	*Ideira* (Living plateau)	*Hagikura-daira* (Hagikura plateau)	–	*Maede* (In front of house) *Uchi-no-shita* (Under house)
		Tokorozawa (Brook at settlement)	*O'haka-no-ta* (Paddies near graveyard)	*Ni-maime* (Second patch from a road) *Nagai-ta* (Long patch) *Nawashiro* (Rice nursery) *Shiro-suna* (White sand ground) *Kurumi-no-ki* (Walnut tree on a ridge)
			Tokorozawa-no-hatake (Tokorozawa farm)	*Dotsubo* (Pile of silkworm dung) *Ume* (Plum tree on a ridge) *Kubo* (Hollow ground)
	Sub-zone	Lower sub-zone	Block	Minor place
11	*Urayama* (Back hills)	*Gobayashi* (Common hill)	*Tokorozawa* (Brook at settlement)	*Tokorozawa-no-yama* (Hill along Tokorozawa brook) *Oinarisama-no-yama* (Hill of clan's fox shrine)
14	*Mukouyama* (Opposite hills)	–	*Komokkawa* (Hills of straw mat brook)	–

Note: This list of patch names includes only some of the sample household. [–] means that it is not classified. ( ) indicates English meaning. Each number of sub-zone corresponds to a number in Figure 3.
Source: Author's fieldwork

Place, boundaries, and symbolic space

In a humanistic geography approach, the word 'place' often indicates points imbued by the local people with symbolic and social meanings (Tuan 1977:85-135). Three major systems of classification exist to define 'place' within the context of a traditional Japanese village.

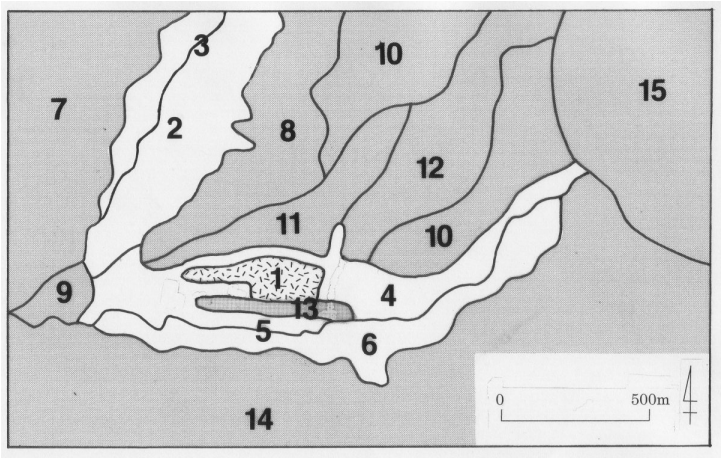

Figure 3. Locations of land-use zones and sub-zones
Note: The *Yashima* zone (No. 16) is east of the *O'heishi* zone (No. 15).
Source: Author's fieldwork, topographical maps, and aerial photographs

First, in Hagikura, Shinto and Buddhist facilities as well as public institutions can be regarded as places (Table 3, Figure 5). In the settlement and hills, a shrine or a series of shrines protect the people working in each land-use zone. Such sacred facilities functioned as the semiotic center of meaning: the main shrine of *Yonegami* (god of rice) in the settlement zone, the clan's *Inari* (fox god of agriculture) shrines in the farmland zone (Figure 6), and a mountain deity shrine of *Yama-no-kami* (forest god) in the hill zone. In the center of the settlement zone, important public facilities were located in an open space, which can be understood as the semantic 'center' of the entire village territory (Figure 5: 1-8).

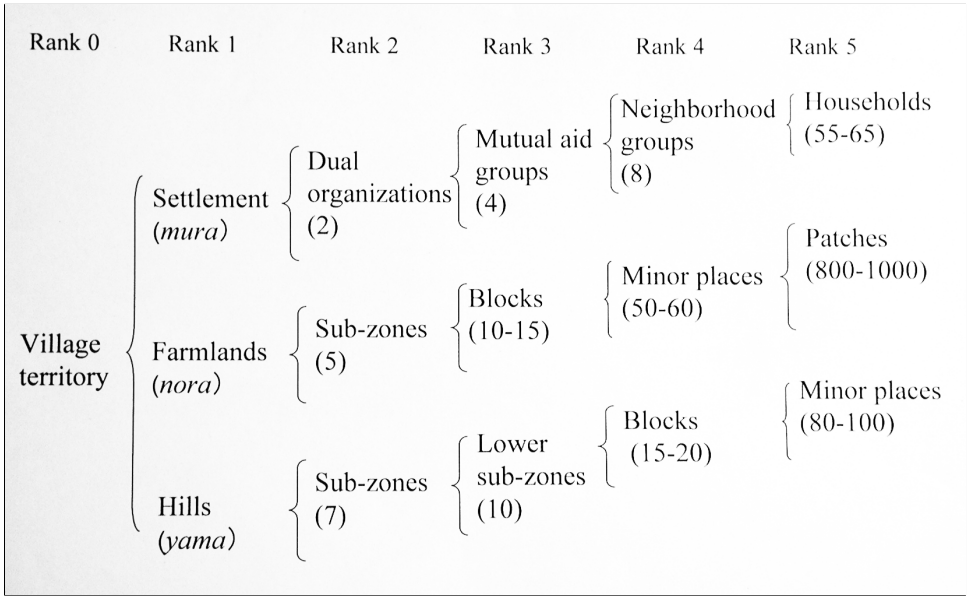

Figure 4. Folk taxonomy of subsistence space in Hagikura
Note: Parenthesized numbers show the number of categories. For minor places and patches, the numbers are estimated based on samples of one household, village cadasters, and cadastral maps.

Table 3. Places and their meanings in Hagikura

	Zone	Place	Main meaning	Onbashira logs
1	Settlement	*Yonegami* main shrine	God of villge and center of entire territory	Planted
2		*Yakushi-dou* temple	Open space and center of village	
3		Community center	Ditto	
4		Primary school	Ditto	
5		Fire-fighting center	Ditto	
6		Agricultural cooperative	Ditto	
7		*Dousojin* stone deity	God of traffic and transportation	
8		God's rice field	Field attached to the main shrine	
9	Farmland	Graveyard	Place of fear near an inner boundary	
10	Hill	Fox shrines of the clans	Gods of clan and their farmland	Planted
11		Mountain deity	God of hills	Planted
12		*Okuwasama* monument	God of ancestors' clearing	Planted
13		*Fudou* stone saints	Gods of mountain-based asceticism	Planted
14		*Oyama* stone saints	Ditto	Planted
15		*Hachiman* shrine	God of working in forests	
16		*Kiotoshi* shrine	Guardian of Onbashira ritual	
17		*Yokitate* shrine	Ditto	
18	Boundary	*Hazure* (without a landmark)	Downstream of inner boundary point	
19		Intersection with a brook	Upstream of inner boundary point	
20		Pine tree and stone deities	Downstream of middle boundary point	
21		Pine tree	Upstream of middle boundary point	
22		Stone deities	Main entrance of village	
23		*Fudaba* (without a landmark)	Back entrance of village	

Note: Each number corresponds to a number shown in Figure 5.
Source: Author's fieldwork

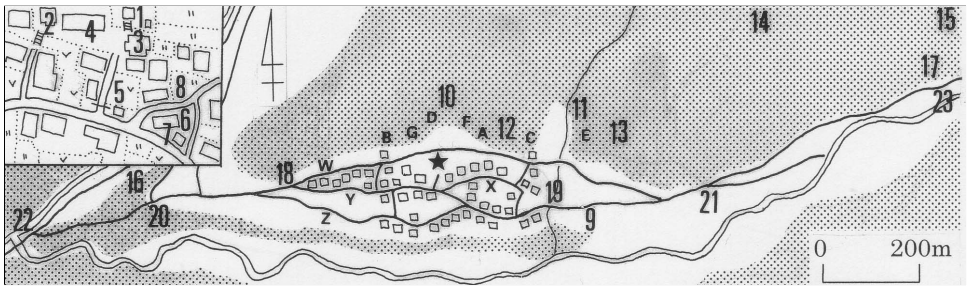

Figure 5. Locations of places and main roads.
Note: Each number corresponds to a number shown in Table 3. Star mark shows the main shrine. Each letter shows a clan's fox shrine (A-G) and one of four main roads (W-Z).

Figure 6. A clan's fox shrine
Source: Author's photo

Second, in contrast to such semiotic 'centers,' the people of Hagikura recognized six boundary points on the periphery of the village territory: inner points between the settlement and the farmland; middle points between the farmland and the hills; and outer points between the hills and the outside world (Table 3, Figure 5: 18-23). These boundary points were marked by such objects as stone statues and isolated pine trees and through varied ritualistic behavior on the main road. In the inner pair, boundaries were formed by a downstream point called *Hazure* (end of the houses) without any landmark and an upstream point intersecting the *Tokorozawa* brook near a common graveyard. In the middle pair, the downstream point was marked by a big pine tree, a few stone deities, and a stone monument to a poet; upstream, it was marked by another tall pine tree at a point where paths diverged. The outer pair's boundary points were regarded as the entrances of the village: downstream at an old national highway called the *Nakasendo* Road, where there were stone deities, a monument to a famous haiku poet (Matsuo Basho), and a tea stall; upstream the boundary point was called *Fudaba*, the entrance of the Imperial Forest. Some intersections of these six boundary points were also ritual places regarded as sacred places.

Third, these symbolic places and boundaries can also be contrasted between 'sacred places' and 'places of fear' (Shimazu 1989:212-213). In Hagikura, the former places are regarded as the six points of shrines or stone saints in which the people open the *Onbashira* (literally 'holy log') ritual: the main shrine, a series of the

clans' fox shrines, the mountain deity, and three areas of stone saints on the common hill of *Urayama* (Table 3). Onbashira, the most important ritual in the Suwa Basin, is held every six years, when people bring tall logs from the deep mountains of *Okuyama* and plant them around shrines (Figure 7). Local residents believed that the square zone around a shrine, surrounded by four holy logs, was the source of sacred power.

Figure 7. Onbashira planting ritual at the main shrine.
Source: Author's photo

By contrast, 'places of fear' were sites where ghosts, devils, and darkness lurked. In the village, such places were predominately concentrated in the boundary points mentioned above and in a periphery 'wilderness' zone of the hills. In Japan, such wilderness hill zones were also cultural spaces of daily subsistence and religion. These boundary points were therefore ambiguous places—both sacred and feared—generally observed in Japanese traditional villages (Yagi 1988b: 144).

Thus, each domain of place, boundary, and symbolic space can be included in a single classification domain of 'place' in the broad sense, although up to now they have been treated as different and separated domains.

Orientation

The Hagikura people also had their own system of folk orientation. The main shrine of *Yonegami* was located at the cardinal point of the axes of the north-south and east-west directions: the exact center of the entire territory. Based on the distance from the main shrine, they often used different orientation categories. When referring to locations closer to the settlement zone, they called the south river side *omote* (front), the north hill side *ura* (rear), the east upstream *wade* (upstream), and

the west downstream *shimo* (downstream). When referring to locations farther up the hill zone, they called the southward area *mukou* (opposite), the northward area *ue* (above), the eastward area *higashi* (east), and the westward area *nishi* (west). When indicating intermediate locations within the farmland zone, they used the same categories as in the hill zone, except for the south direction of the lower river terrace, which they called *shita* (under).

Moreover, the four main roads through the village were referred to by this orientation system: north to south (Figure 5: W-Z), *Uwa-michi* (upper road); *Naka-michi* (middle road); *Hon-douri* (the main road); and *Shita-michi* (lower road).

In the village, people recognized that to the south they could view the sun in the sky, rice fields, and the opposite hills; in contrast, the north, the rear, was surrounded by woody hills. Almost all shrines also faced south, located on upper or superior sites of the settlement zone. Religious beliefs banned the establishment of shrines facing north. In addition to these sacred buildings, most traditional residential houses also faced south. In 1998, among the 58 traditional houses within the village, 58.6% faced south, 20.7% east, 13.8% west, and only 6.9% north.

In short, within the village a southerly direction was generally recognized as front and lower, in contrast to the north, which was rear and upper. This orientation principle was prescribed by a typical topography of *feng-shui* (literally 'wind and water') environmental thought developed in ancient China, whose front was a river plateau and whose rear was the surrounding hills (Higuchi 1981:106-131).

Conclusion

The following general conclusions could be derived from this investigation of Hagikura village. Considering rural space as a system of signs, spatial classification systems (subsistence space, place, and orientation) are abstracted as the logical and deep structure that reflects the tacit understanding of the villagers (Figure 8). This deep structure as *langue* prescribes the concrete and surface-level structure of landscape as *parole:* boundary markers (stone deities and pine trees), land-use forms (houses, public institutions, farmland, and woods), and the semiotic centers of land-use zones (shrines).

Previously, Japanese social sciences have considered land-use zones, folk taxonomy, dual organization, and villagers' cosmology, including orientation and boundaries, as different and independent classification domains (Yagi 1988a:64-65). However, the author identified the following five interrelationships among these spatial domains. First, land-use zones are the first rank of the landscape folk taxonomy of a village. Second, dual organizations can be considered the second rank of the social space system of a settlement zone. Third, the classification of orientation and boundaries is formed as a grid of coordinate axes and concentric circles, and villagers refer to this grid in their daily activities to orient themselves within the land-use zones. Fourth, the villagers' cosmology is formed by the deep structure or *langue* that includes all of the spatial systems discussed in this paper. Fifth, even though the abstract deep structure of these classification systems belongs to the syntax of rural space, a symbolic classification system based on the villagers' ideology is on the connotation level of semantics.

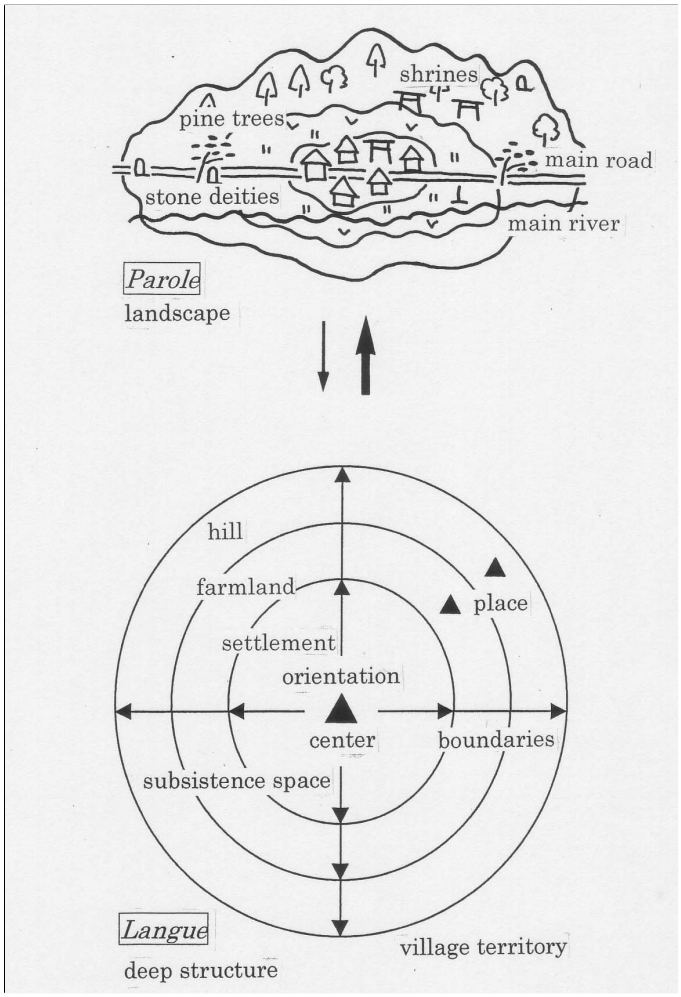

Figure 8. Hagikura's landscape and its deep structure

Beyond the case study reported here, however, some landscape and spatial elements in a village might seem contradictory to and excluded from such a deep structure of *langue.* In the future, we should examine in detail these folk classification systems of space in other Japanese villages and in other countries' villages to develop the synthetic perspective used in this paper.

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[J] *in Japanese;* [JE] *in Japanese with an English abstract.*

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