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Language Loss and Revitalization in the Ryukyu Islands

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Every two weeks one of the world's estimated 6,000 languages dies. It appears inevitable to many that the number of languages spoken throughout the world will have drastically diminished by the end of the 21st century. Pessimistic estimations consider that as many as 80% of the languages currently used will by then have vanished. The danger of such loss does not go unnoticed. Many speakers of indigenous minority languages around the world struggle to retain their mother tongues. This holds also true for the Ryukyu Islands, located between Kyushu and Taiwan. In the course of the nation building process since the Meiji era, a language regime was established throughout Japan in which the language of Tokyo came to serve as the means of inter-regional communication throughout Japan, including the Ryukyu Islands. The spread of Standard Japanese led to re-negotiations of the language-identity nexus in the Ryukyu Islands. As a matter of fact, so strong proved the idea of one unitary Japanese national language to be in Japan that the Ryukyuan languages are seriously endangered today and conscious efforts of language revitalization are necessary to ensure their future use. This is an account of how the Ryukyuan languages came to be endangered and of current efforts for their revitalization.

Modernist language ideology and the language – dialect question

The boundaries of languages and language varieties – a term linguists prefer to dialects since it does not connote the idea of a deviation from a chosen standard – do not come into existence by themselves. They reflect the interests of those responsible for drawing these boundaries. The extension and the names of languages and language varieties are, more often than not, influenced by nation imagining ideology.

The Ryukyuan languages, their classification and assessment are a case in point. During the forced assimilation of the Ryukyu Kingdom into the emerging Japanese nation state between 1872 and 1879, the various language varieties of the Ryukyu Islands came to be designated as Japanese dialects. The first such classification was made by a bureaucrat. Matsuda Michiyuki, a high-ranking official in the Japanese foreign ministry, was the first to stress linguistic correspondences between Japan and the Ryukyu Islands in the early 1870s. He claimed that the varieties spoken in the Ryukyu Islands were part of the Japanese language.

The first study on the Ryukyuan languages by a trained linguist was that of Basil Hall Chamberlain in 1895. It successfully established evidences of a shared Ryukyuan-Japanese genealogy. That is to say, Chamberlain proved that Japanese and the Ryukyuan language family share the same ancestor language, similar to, say, French, Italian and Spanish. Today we know that Japanese and the Ryukyuan languages must have split not long before the first written evidences of Japanese appeared, that is to say, at some point before the 7th century. Chamberlain treated Ryukyuan as a set of languages distinct from Japanese.

There are good reasons for doing so. The chain of mutual intelligibility is interrupted several times in the Ryukyu Islands. The concept of mutual intelligibility serves linguists as an etic tool, in other words, as a politically and culturally disinterested means for drawing linguistic boundaries. In Japan, for instance, speakers of a Tohoku language variety and a Kyushu variety might experience severe difficulties in understanding each other. However, the chain of mutual intelligibility is nowhere interrupted in the Japanese main islands as mutual intelligibility to the neighbouring local variety is always possible.

On the basis of mutual unintelligibility, five different varieties of the Ryukyuan language family can be ascertained. These are, from north to south, the varieties spoken on Amami-Oshima, Okinawa, Miyako, Yaeyama and Yonaguni. These varieties form the Ryukyu language family. Needless to say, none of these varieties allows for mutual intelligibility with any Japanese variety. Following the conventions of comprehensive glossaries of world languages, rather than Japanese national (identity) linguistics (kokugogaku), these varieties will be treated as languages in the following. Since the Amami-Oshima island group is part of Kagoshima prefecture, the term Ryukyu is preferred over Okinawa.

The linguistic situation in the Ryukyu Islands is complex. The doyen of Ryukyuan linguistics, Hokama Shuzen, proposes the following division of Ryukyuan varieties (from south to north):

Yonaguni		
Sakijima	Yaeyama	Ishigaki
		Hateruma
	Miyako	Miyako
		Irabu
		Tamara
Amami-Okinawa	North-Okinawa	
	South Okinawa	
	Yoron	
	Okinoerabu	East Okinoerabu

In contrast to the present paper, Hokama bases his classification on language typology and not on the concept of mutual intelligibility. Nonetheless, reference to his classification is helpful here because it emphasizes the vast differences that exist even within the major varieties spoken on Amami-Oshima, Okinawa, Miyako and Yaeyama. The biggest typological differences are those between Yonaguni, Sakijima and Amami-Okinawa. Typological differences with regard to phonology, morphology and syntax between these three typological categories can then be further subcategorized into the typological categories Yaeyama, Miyako, North-Okinawa etc. Since Hokama treats the Ryukyuan

	West Okinoerabu
Tokunoshima	
Amami-Oshima	North Amami-Oshima
	South Amami-Oshima
Kikai	

varieties within the concept of national language (kokugo), he lacks the concept of languages. As a result, we find Yonaguni in the left column but Yaeyama, Miyako and Amami-Oshima in the middle column. Okinawa as a unified speech community is absent in his scheme, reflecting, as it does, the fact that there exist marked differences between Northern and Southern Okinawan as well as the fact that the study of these two varieties has been conducted most comprehensively. In other words, awareness of the differences between Northern Okinawan and Southern Okinawan is most pronounced. Language variation in the Ryukyu Islands does not stop at the types of langue varieties in Hokama's right column. All of the approximately 50 populated islands have distinctive language varieties which very often allow for many more subdivisions within them. It is worthy of note in this context that the Okinawa Language Research Centre (Okinawa gengo kenkyu senta) has conducted phonological studies into some 800 different local varieties.

The differences between the Ryukyuan varieties and Japanese are extensive. Tokyo university professor Hattori Shiro demonstrated in the 1950s that the percentage of shared cognates in the basic vocabulary between Tokyo and Shuri (Okinawa) stands at 66% and at 59% with regard to Miyako. The latter percentage is lower than that between German and English. As an illustration of the differences in the lexicon and morphology, consider the following sentence taken from a contemporary version of the Momotaro tale:

Okinawa : Sigu kadi nndandi ici hoocaasi taacinkai sakandi sakutu, naakakara uziraasigisaru ufuwikiganu nziti caabitan.

Standard Japanese: Sugu tabete miyo to itte hocho de futatsu ni sako to shitara, naka kawairashii otoko no ko ga dete kimashita.

English: When he said that he wanted to eat it right away and was just about to cut it into two pieces with his knife, a cute boy emerged from within (the peach).

Mutual unintelligibility notwithstanding, Japanese linguists of the Meiji period chose to rely on Matsuda Michiyuki's view according to which the Ryukyuan varieties were part of the same language. They included both the Japanese and the Ryukyuan varieties in the newly created concept of national language (kokugo). In so doing, they followed the model of most Western nation states which claimed that all language varieties within the boundaries of the state were part of one language, the national language. While dialectologists drew a clear line between the Ryukyuan varieties and those of the main islands, everyone else came to regard the Ryukyuan varieties simply as yet another Japanese dialect group. Dialects, however, that deviated very strongly from Standard Japanese. This deviance from Standard Japanese led to the view that these varieties presented an obstacle and should best be done away with. The Ryukyu Islands were thus perceived to have a serious language problem and, consequently, the view emerged that Ryukyuans had to be relieved of the 'burden' of their languages. This specific view of language, or language ideology as it is called in linguistics, was not limited to the Ryukyu Islands. It became widespread across the world as an effect of the emergence of modern nation states. Such nation-imagining language ideology is responsible for the fact that bilingualism in nation states is, more often than not, unstable. Speakers of minority languages are often pressured to express their loyalty to the state by abandoning their mother tongue. Exactly this happened in the Ryukyu Islands after 1879.

Language shift before 1945

During the first eight years of Japanese rule over the Ryukyu Islands a strict policy of preservation of ancient customs was implemented. It was only in 1879 that the first two exceptions were made. The Meiji government ordered that this policy should not apply for education and industrial development. Starting in 1880, the view began to prevail that Japanese language dissemination was unavoidable in order to gain control over the islands and to govern them in the interests of mainland Japan. Following the reorganization of the Ryukyu Domain into Okinawa Prefecture in 1879, Vice Minister of Education Tanaka Fujimaro was dispatched to the archipelago with the objective of developing and implementing an educational policy for the prefecture. In his history of Okinawa George H. Kerr describes how Tanaka, upon visiting the prefecture, decided that Ryukyuans had to learn Japanese and therefore ordered that a Conversation Training Centre be established. Such training facilities had been founded throughout Japan prior to the implementation of the 1872 educational system in order to provide for teacher training. In contrast to teacher training facilities in mainland Japan, the Conversation Training Centre in Okinawa was also responsible for the compilation of a bilingual Okinawa-Japanese language textbook titled 'Okinawa Conversation' (Okinawa taiwa). It was written by mainland officials from the Department of Education in collaboration with some Ryukyuan members of the pre-modern ruling class. The textbook was used from 1880 onwards in all schools of the prefecture.

The efforts to render Ryukyuans Japanese through language education became more comprehensive after the proclamation of the Imperial Rescript on Education in 1890. Attention shifted from mere communicational needs to national citizen education and imperial subject education. These attempts grew more intense in Okinawa Prefecture following Japan's 1895 victory in the Sino-Japanese War. Following the integration of Taiwan into the Japanese empire in the same year, the greater differences between Taiwanese and Japanese made policymakers and the local population aware of similarities between Ryukyuans and mainland Japanese.

Starting in the first decade of the twentieth century, efforts to spread Japanese increasingly employed coercive measures. Ryukyuan languages were banned from schools in the so-called Ordinance to Regulate the Dialect in 1907. When a Movement for the Enforcement of the Standard Language was established in 1931, language dissemination activities attained a new quality. Together with the Department of Education, the movement developed schemes for Japanese language dissemination beyond the public domain. Japanese was promoted through debate or presentation circles. In order to secure a thorough spread of Japanese, relatives of school children were invited to participate. Speaking a Ryukyuan language during such presentation circles was considered an unpatriotic act, and children taking part in debate circles risked being penalized if they failed to speak Japanese. Japanese language dissemination became increasingly seen as an important instrument for forcing Ryukyuans to adapt to mainland customs and traditions. In accordance with the National Spiritual Mobilization Movement, launched in 1937 after the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War, the local Department of Education and the Movement for Enforcement of the Standard Language compiled a policy platform called Programme for Education in Okinawa Prefecture. The programme placed Japanese language dissemination high on its agenda. In order to forcefully implement language policy measures, committees responsible for the supervision of language dissemination were set up in all local communities. An ordinance proscribed the Ryukyuan languages at government offices and at various other public institutions. People who addressed the staff of post offices or governmental offices in Ryukyuan had to be refused service and employees caught using a Ryukyuan language risked punishment.

In short, Japanese language dissemination at the time relied heavily on negative and coercive measures. One of the most notorious forms of punishment was the so-called dialect tag which had to be worn around the neck by the last pupil to have used Ryukyuan in class. The pupil wearing it was then responsible for passing it on and therefore had to monitor the language use of his fellow students. The use of the dialect

tag increased drastically in the 1920s and 1930s, peaking at the time of the general mobilization campaign. The view prevailed that the perceived language problems of the Ryukyu Islands were best solved by their eradication, by punitive means where necessary. It is worth of note here that the use of the dialect tag was not exclusively confined to Okinawa Prefecture. It included Kagoshima Prefecture and the entire Tohoku region, two regions with distinctive local dialects. Nowhere, however, was the use of the dialect tag more prominent than in the Ryukyu Islands and it was only there that attempts were made to ban the local language varieties in private domains.

Language ideology, the determination of what language(s) ought to be, played a crucial role in the language shift processes in the Ryukyu Islands. As an effect of language modernization the national language, kokugo, became to be represented by, if not equated with, its standard variety. In addition, the view emerged that Standard Japanese was 'correct' and that deviations from it were 'wrong'. The ideology of linguistic nationalism was furthermore based on the belief that all Japanese nationals had equal access to the national language and hence should be equally proficient in it. Therefore, lack of respect for and proficiency in (Standard) Japanese became to be perceived as anomalous. The effects of insufficient proficiency were embarrassment and the reasons for deviant language attitudes and language behaviour were sought at the individual level.

As an effect of such ideological beliefs, the Ryukyu Islands thus stood out as the region in which (perceived) embarrassing language behaviour was most pronounced. There was resistance against such views and the suppression of the Ryukyuan language and culture by local activists and scholars of Okinawan studies. These included Jahana Noburo, Iha Fuyu, Higashionna Kanjun and Kinjo Choei as well as by mainland scholars of folklore studies such as Yanagita Kunio, dialectologists such as Tojo Misao and folk art scholars such as Yanagi Muneyoshi, to mention only some of the more prominent. However, the endeavours to end the oppression of Ryukyuan languages failed due to the growing pressure on Ryukyuans to adapt to mainland Japan language and culture during the Sino-Japanese and later the Pacific War. After 1945, much of the research of the aforementioned scholars was used to construct a Ryukyuan identity, which was embedded in a larger Japanese context in order to resist the unwelcome US occupation (see below).

The dissemination of Standard Japanese and the suppression of the Ryukyuan languages had drastic effects on the language ecology of the Ryukyu Islands. Standard Japanese came to be exclusively used in the public domain. It thus replaced the variety of Shuri (Okinawa), the ancient capital of the Ryukyu Kingdom, which had previously served as the language of official and inter-island communication. Due to further consequences of the modernization process such as an increasing mobility of the population, a growing rate of exogamy and an extension of infrastructure, local language varieties also came under pressure and were increasingly often replaced by Standard Japanese in private domains too. Drastically changing political circumstances notwithstanding, language shift from the Ryukyuan languages to Standard Japanese continued unremittingly after 1945.

Language shift after 1945

The only land battle of the Pacific War fought in Japan took place in Okinawa. Before Japan surrendered to the Allied Powers on September15th 1945, more than one quarter of the Okinawan population was dead and a military government was set up for the Ryukyu Islands. US Military authorities exercised exclusive control over the islands until 1972. While the San Francisco Treaty of 1951 restored Japanese sovereignty, occupation did not end for the Ryukyu Islands in spite of the fact that petitions had been handed in, in which more than two thirds of the Ryukyu electorate asked for a return to Japan in July 1951.

Circumstances for language planning could hardly be worse than they were in the Ryukyu Islands immediately after 1945. With Okinawa Island being completely destroyed and the population living in temporary camps, language planning was not a priority issue. Provision of food for the population and reestablishment of infrastructure proved to be more urgent tasks. In some cases, pupils learned writing by drawing script characters with their fingers in the sand of nearby beaches. There was, in addition, a drastic shortage of qualified teachers due to the fact that many teachers (and pupils) had been killed. Many of the surviving teachers filled administrative positions left vacant by the departure of mainland personnel, increasing thereby teacher shortage.

Two groups vied to dominate language planning activities between 1945 and 1972. American military authorities sought to encourage the use of the Ryukyuan languages (and English), while important Ryukyuan institutions promoted Standard Japanese. A report compiled in 1944 by anthropologists from Yale University for the preparation of a possible occupation of Japan stressed exploitations of and discrimination against Ryukyuans by mainland Japanese. On this basis, the American authorities developed a policy of encouraging Ryukyuan autonomy. Such policy rested above all on US perceptions of the strategically important location of the Ryukyu Archipelago. US authorities thus explored the Yale-report as a basis to legitimize their attempts to split Okinawa from Japan, that is, to preserve it within the orbit of American power as a bulwark with respect to US policies toward China, Taiwan, and Korea.

Along the lines of a policy encouraging Ryukyuan independence, mainland Japanese teaching materials were initially banned and American authorities called for the compilation of Ryukyuan textbooks. A Textbook Compilation Office was set up. However, the prevailing view among its members was that the development of Ryukyuan textbooks was unrealistic. Attempts at developing Ryukyuan teaching materials ran into several problems, such as the absence of a modern written Ryukyuan style since official records had been written in classical Chinese prior to the Japanese seizure of the Ryukyus and the fact that pre-modern literature had largely been composed in Chinese and Japanese written styles. Furthermore, a fixed orthography did not exist, nor resources and materials on which such textbooks could be based. As a result, the idea of Ryukyuan textbooks was quickly abandoned. With American interest in language planning quickly declining as well, Japanese textbooks were imported from mainland Japan after 1951.

In contrast to US postwar planning for Japan, development and strict implementation of a far-reaching occupation policy for Okinawa, 'the rock' as GIs derogatively called it, had never been high on the agenda in the early occupation years. It took until Communist victory in China in 1949 and the outbreak of the Korean War in the following year before a long term policy for the island was framed. By that time, however, a return to the pre-war policy of Japanese language spread had taken root. Thus, after a short period of uncertainty about language education in school, the practices established before 1945 were continued. The only difference was that Japanese language education was no longer called 'national language' (kokugo) but 'reading lessons' (yomikata). A conference of school directors in 1950 determined that school education should follow exactly the pattern of mainland Japan, with Japanese as the language of instruction.

Whereas the first initiatives in language planning were taken by American occupation authorities, the focus shifted soon to Ryukyuan educators. Standard Japanese served Ryukyuans as a symbol of their struggle for the reversion of Okinawa to Japan. Part of the reason was that the Americans were already using Ryukyuan languages as a means for distancing the Ryukyus from Japan, and thereby, implicitly, for a continued affiliation with the US. Ryukyuans were clearly aware that the US administration was trying to prolong the occupation in their own interest by claiming that Ryukyuans were not Japanese. While the US was thus trying to undo the effects of linguistic and cultural assimilation of the past 50 years, such language and identity planning was not supported by Ryukyuans. US language policy only produced resistance which meant, with a view to language, continued Standard Japanese language spread. Whereas the view that Ryukyuans were a different nation than the Japanese prevailed among the US authorities and, to a certain degree, also among Ryukyuans in the early years of the

occupation, political activities aiming at Ryukyuan independence declined drastically after 1950. The presence of extensive military infrastructure, land confiscation, noise pollution, crime, prostitution, poverty, all had the effect of leading the overwhelming majority of Ryukyuans to favour immediate reversion to Japan. US American occupation thus inadvertently reinforced Ryukyu Islands- mainland Japan bonds. Promotion of Standard Japanese after 1945 thus continued to serve as a means to foster a Japanese identity for the Ryukyuan population and a means of resisting the unwelcome US occupation.

Due to the continued efforts to promote Standard Japanese after 1945, use of Ryukyuan languages or Ryukyuan interference on Standard Japanese were again condemned as bad language. Even the dialect tag saw a revival. Other oppressive measures against Ryukyuan in schools included less drastic forms of punishment and admonition, such as counting the instance of use of Ryukyuan words by individual pupils. Those found using such words too frequently were requested to use only Standard Japanese in class or had their names recorded in the class register. Local linguists such as Karimata Shigeihsa and Takaesu Yoriko reported to me that they had experienced such measures in their early schooldays in the 1960s and 70s.

Natural intergenerational language transmission in the Ryukyuan languages was interrupted from the early years of the US occupation. The diverse mosaic of sociocultural contexts and experiences makes it difficult to generalize a single, monolithic Ryukyuan language situation. In most cases people born after 1950 no longer speak Ryukyuan languages, particularly those living on Okinawa, the main island. Speakers of Ryukyuan tend to include younger people in the outlying islands of the Okinawa Island group as well as in the other island groups. It can be noted that there exist differences between local communities within island groups which seem to reflect the various degrees of radicalism with which Standard Japanese was spread. Furthermore, language shift occurred faster in the cities than in the countryside. As a result, the sociolinguistic situation is complex. In addition to the older generation, usually proficient in a Ryukyuan language variety, the middle generation often has passive skills and some of them can even be regarded as semi-speakers. The young generation is overwhelmingly monolingual Japanese. In addition, contact varieties of Standard Japanese and Ryukuyan varieties have emerged. These varieties are summarized under the term Okinawan-Japanese (uchinayamtoguchi). They show strong variation according to region and age of its speakers. The study into the current use of these contact varieties is still little developed, due to the fact that they are so widely spread and considered to be of little prestige.

Attempts at language revitalization

In recognition of the endangerment of local cultures and languages several attempts have been made to revitalize languages at risk in the Ryukyu Islands. The early efforts initially concentrated in the northern Amami-Oshima island group. The earliest language revival organizations on Okinawa Island is that of Okinawa City (formerly Koza City), established in 1955 as Koza Society of Culture. By the mid-1990s more than half of all local communities in Okinawa Prefecture had societies devoted to the maintenance and promotion of Ryukyuan culture. In 1995, the Prefectural Society of Okinawan Culture was founded as an association of these societies. It organizes the popular annual Ryukyuan public speech event called Let's Speak the Island Languages Meeting. The threat of language loss has led to numerous popular publications about Ryukyuan languages and various language textbooks. News in Okinawan is broadcast daily on local radio. In recent years, presentation circles and plays in Ryukyuan languages have been incorporated in the school curriculum as part of local culture classes. There are also a few language classes as part of extracurricular activities. Furthermore, Ryukyuan language classes are offered in tertiary education as part of general education where they enjoy huge popularity. Since all five universities in the Ryukyus are located on Okinawa Island, the variety taught there is that of Okinawa, more specifically Shuri/Naha.

The most important institution for the revival of a Ryukyuan language is the Society for Spreading Okinawan (Uchinaguchi fukyu kyogikai). At its constituting meeting, the society formulated as its objectives the establishment of dialect classes at elementary and middle schools, the organization of Okinawan teacher training, and the development of an Okinawan standard orthography.

While a standard orthography has now been established for the language varieties of the Okinawa Island group and teacher training is being held, Okinawan has not been introduced in schools. In other words, education in both public and private schools is conducted exclusively in Japanese and it is not possible to study Ryukyuan as a second language in the schools. Introducing classes in Okinawan requires the approval of the Okinawa Education Council, which has so far not been supportive of the scheme. Other activities of the Society for Spreading Okinawan include the design and distribution of an Okinawa language button. Wearing the button signals that the bearer wishes to be addressed in Okinawan. Furthermore, the Society organized the first Island Language Day which was held at the Naha community centre on September 18th this year. An estimated 100 endorsed a declaration asking for the recognition of Okinawan, Miyako, Yaeyama and Yonaguni as independent speech communities. (Note that the language varieties of Amami-Oshima, which are located in Kagoshima Prefecture, are absent). The language declaration claims the rights to use these languages in private and public domains, to receive language instruction in order to develop language proficiency, and the right to receive public services in these languages.

There are other research and speech circles in the Ryukyu Islands. On Okinawa Island alone, I could trace such circles at community centres in Shuri, Naha, Urasoe, Tomigusuke, Haebaru, Kochinda, Nishihara, Tamagusuke, Okinawa City, Ginowan, Chatan, Kadena and Ginoza. With the exception of Chatan, where children are being taught Okinawan, these circles are usually visited by people over 50 who primarily look for opportunities to use Okinawan. Participants do not actively endeavour to spread the language to new speakers and domains of usage. These circles can therefore not be seen as language revival institutions in the strict sense.

The future of the Ryukyuan languages

The most important measure of language revitalization is that of passing the retreating language on to younger generations. This is of course easier said than done. The current popularity of things Ryukyuan throughout Japan however offers opportunities for language revitalization since it includes appreciation of the local languages. Two examples illustrate both renewed interest in Okinawan languages and the difficulties in passing the languages to new generations. In its issue of April 11th 2001, the Okinawa Times reported on a student from Osaka who started studying Okinawan after starting his studies at the University of the Ryukyus. He states that it struck him that there were language varieties in Japan which he could not understand at all. In a letter to the editor, published in Okinawa Times on September 7th 2005, a 17 year old high school student from Uruma City on Okinawa criticizes elderly speakers for not using the local language when talking to her and urges them to pass the languages down to younger generations. In concluding, she writes: ‘I, who was born in Okinawa, feel ashamed for not even understanding jokes in the language of Okinawa. Will the dialect really vanish just like this? Don't you have the impression that a great quality of Okinawa will be lost?’

The situation is difficult, but there is hope. In particular the current dialect boom in Japan might be useful for Ryukyuan language revitalization. With Standard Japanese being thoroughly spread among the young generation, varieties other than Standard Japanese are experiencing a revaluation. It can be noted that in trend-spots such as Shibuya young women, always quickest to set and respond to linguistic trends, are inserting as much dialectal elements as possible in their speech. As an effect, the formerly ubiquitous shouts of ‘totemo kawaii!’ (totally cute) are in the process of being replaced by their equivalents from local varieties such as ‘namara!’ (Hokkaido) or ‘sekarashika!’ and

‘chikappomenkoi!’ (Kyushyu).

The dialect boom has been reinforced and picked up by Japanese mass media. One of the current linguistic bestsellers is ‘Chikappomenkoi hogen renshucho’ (Totally cute dialect exercise book). Many popular TV shows have dialect corners and the number of web-sites on local varieties is constantly rising. Ryukyuan local varieties meet thereby with particular interest. In the music industry, the case of Isamu Shimoji (35) is worth of note. Originally from Miyako, Shimoji was a company employee on Okinawa until a few years ago. When he threw in some Miyako language into a karaoke rendition of an Eric Clapton song, friends convinced him to give a concert of Miyako songs at a local community centre. Soon self-produced tapes made it to the airwaves of the local radio station FM Okinawa. Shimoji went on to produce a CD of contemporary popular music titled ‘Kaitakusha’ (Pioneer) which is almost completely in the Miyako variety. The CD is selling very well throughout Japan.

The recent Japanese Okinawa boom notwithstanding, resistance against attempts to revitalize local languages are far from being unknown. For example, in a letter to the editor, published in Okinawa Times on December 3rd 2004, a government official opposed the idea of reviving the Ryukyuan languages and having them taught in school. She writes: ‘I have come across the misunderstanding that the Okinawa dialects are believed to constitute language systems of their own because terms such as Okinawan or island language and the like exist. As a matter of fact, they are merely instances of corrupt accents and Old Japanese words which have not vanished but continue to be used in Okinawa. (…) Although there have recently been voices calling for teaching the dialects as languages to children, such a practice would be dreadful. What is the idea of teaching corrupt accents? If pupils are not taught to speak proper Japanese they will face humiliation when grown up because of the language barrier.’

In addition to resistance, many attempts at reviving the Ryukyuan languages simply fail. For instance, a course on the language variety of Yoron Island started in 2004 only to be cancelled after a few sessions because it failed to attract participants. As a rule, activists aiming at language revival are left to rely on their own wits and funds. It seems that this is not enough to achieve a broad-based revival.

There exists no language policy comprehensively addressing the linguistic situation in the Ryukyu Islands. There is also a lack of professionally trained linguists. Several branches of linguistics such as sociolinguistics or linguistic anthropology are absent. Much of the linguistic research in the Ryukyu Islands is conducted by amateurs, who find support from linguistics professors at the local universities. A research grant of the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology for a project called "Endangered Languages of the Pacific Rim" which ran from 1999 to 2003 provided a much needed impetus for professionally conducted research. In spite of the fact that the Ainu and the Ryukyuan languages were recognized as endangered Japanese languages, however, research focused exclusively on language documentation.

While endangered languages require efforts with regard to description and language planning, the latter point has so far been completely neglected. Literally no research has yet been conducted on how the Ryukyuan languages can be revitalized. As it stands, there is no reliable information on questions as fundamental as how many speakers of the different language varieties exist, how old they are, where they are located, and what level of proficiency they have. Furthermore, nothing is known about local awareness concerning the possible loss of their languages in the speech communities themselves, the attitudes of the speech communities toward language endangerment, and, to be based on such fundamental information, realistic goals for language revitalization have not yet been set.

It is a sad fact that the local universities and the International Clearing House of Endangered Languages at the University of Tokyo pay little attention to these aspects of sociolinguistic research. As an effect of such neglect, both issues of the UNESCO Red Book of Endangered Languages completely fail to mention the Ryukyu languages (and have grossly optimistic views on the Ainu language situation). While concentrated efforts are being made to document Ryukyuan language varieties, the greatest need seems to be for language planning rather than on documentation. In particular, acquisition planning, that is to say, the planning for new speakers, is an issue that can ill afford any further delay.

To be sure, the survival of the Ryukyuan languages hinges on language choices to be made by the inhabitants of the Ryukyu Islands. Only they can choose to maintain and transmit their languages. But while grassroots movements have sprung up and a wide-spread appreciation of local culture and language can be noted, there is not such sentiment evident in official institutions. As it stands, the most urgent task in language revitalization is to secure support from local education boards, the prefectural governments at Okinawa and Kagoshima as well as the Japanese state. Having the Ryukyuan languages supported by these institutions would have a huge symbolic meaning, increasing their value and encouraging their future study and use. They could also provide the material and institutional support for a wider language acquisition program.

Thus far, however, it appears that the extent of language endangerment and its consequences have not been fully realized by the Okinawan government, or, if realized, is not perceived as a problem. There is also little awareness of the danger of language loss even among those supportive of the local languages. When I interviewed the local photographer and documentary filmmaker Higa Toyomitsu, who has made audiovisual recordings in Okinawan of more than 500 survivors of the Battle of Okinawa, even Higa, at first, showed a lack of awareness about language endangerment. When I pointed out that there was a need to find new domains of usage and new speakers of the language in order to secure the future existence of the local languages, he answered:

Well, there are such places where you can use Ryukyuan languages. These places exist and I make my recordings there. I myself am such a place. It doesn't matter whether someone speaks well or not. As long as these people are there, the language will be there as well. No worries (daijobu)!

After I explained that the language would vanish with its present speakers if no counter measures were taken, Higa lamented that too few people were getting involved in issues of cultural and linguistic revitalization.

If you make attempts for revitalization, everybody says ‘great’. But when it comes to making an effort, they don't do anything. I mean, look, even the scholars here don't do anything. They only care whether their own field of research is affected. But if you say, let's do something for the revitalization of such and such island language, they will do nothing. They only do something for their research. And if it is for some bigger issue, even they won't do anything. What I would like to see is scholars really getting involved. So what would you make out of something like that? [Laughs].

The remarks by Higa point to the fact that it would be naïve to simply equate statements about concern with evidence that people are really aware of what is at stake and/or that they are ready to get involved.

Language loss affects more than language use–it affects identities. To start with, the Ryukyuan languages, or their absence, profoundly affect Ryukyuan identity. The collapse of a language is always accompanied by thoroughgoing changes in local culture. Attempts to revitalize

languages are therefore not purely linguistic endeavours. Leaving behind languages which have been passed on for hundred of years inevitably constitutes a decisive break with the past. Powerful symbolic links to a shared culture and history are forever lost.

Viewed from another angle, a further decline of the Ryukyuan languages would weaken the multilingual and multicultural bases of Japanese society. This is crucial, because the current policy of ignoring linguistic and cultural diversity within the Japanese nation contradicts and runs counter to other efforts aiming at internationalisation. The latter policy appreciates and cherishes linguistic and cultural diversity on an international level while the former ignores such diversity on the national level. While there has been an upsurge in literature pointing out and describing Japan's multilingual tradition and heritage in recent years many people and institutions continue to cling to the modernist paradigm according to which there is a one-to-one congruence between the Japanese state, nation and language. Producing evidence about Japan's multilingual and mulicultural past and present is one thing, having it reflected in popular attitudes and in official policies quite another.

As it presently stands, modernist language ideology which claims linguistic homogeneity across nation states continues to serve as self-fulfilling prophecy – in Japan as in many other places across the world. Every two weeks a language dies while thousands of others continue to decline. This reinforces the validity of modernist nation-imagining ideology. To many the view of the linguistically homogenous nation appears to be more true, natural, normal and historical day by day. This is one of the major reasons why it is so very difficult to save a threatened language. With every day, it seems to become easier to perceive language revitalization as an unfeasible endeavour. When I asked Shimoji Toshiyuki [Shimoji toshiyuki?] from the Local Research Society of Miyako (Miyako kyodo kenkyukai) whether there were people who would oppose language revitalization and whether he could imagine the local language varieties being taught in school, he sounded first optimistic about the idea and then, slowly, gave in to the view that prospects were rather bleak, enumerating, as he did, the difficulties involved:

If it were possible to save the dialects, and if one could get pupils to use them at school, this would be good. I think that this would be really good. I don't think that anyone would be against it. Well, I don't know, but I don't think that someone would oppose the idea. [Pause] Dialect [pause] at school [pause]. Even if one wished to teach it at school, how should it be taught? To start with, there is the question whether the teacher would be able to speak the dialect. People who speak the dialect properly would need to train the teachers. One would need to incorporate it into general education (sogo gakushu). You know, the curriculum is already set and there is the question to which extent the dialect can be incorporated into the curriculum. There is no need to do it in a half-hearted way like having two lessons a year or so – if it is incorporated into school education, it would need to be done properly. Even if you were to teach it, say one hour a week, I don't think that this would allow pupils to engage in conversations. And one would need a leader who would pursue all these things [pause]. It's difficult, isn't it?

Shimoji is right. It is difficult and everything he mentioned indeed needs to be done. But while that appeared to be almost insurmountable to him, it is most important to recognize that it actually can be achieved. The Ryukyuan language might very well survive in the event that such action is taken. It won't happen, however, unless a growing number of people become involved, readers of Japan Focus not excluded.

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