



# 8

## Ryukyuan Language Reclamation: Individual Struggle and Social Change

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In Japan, individuals are learning languages for many motives, in different ways, and with different consequences. In this chapter, we explore language reclamation, defined by Leonard (2012) as “a larger effort by a community to claim its right to speak a language and to set associated goals in response to community needs and perspectives.” Language reclamation involves emotional exposures, an unsettling of identity, and efforts to overcome collective trauma (see also Chap. 13).<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, we discuss subjective difficulties of Ryukyuan language reclamation and the societal implications thereof. Based on the inductive analysis of 13 semi-structured interviews conducted with individuals involved in Ryukyuan language reclamation, we highlight salient personal

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experiences common to our consultants and the ways in which these experiences lead both to the (re)construction of perceptions and beliefs about themselves and the Ryukyus, which results, in turn, in sociopolitical engagement.

How can one become a ‘Ryukyuan-language-speaking Ryukyuan’ when one has been raised as a ‘Japanese-speaking Japanese’? The dilemma is twofold. Firstly, according to dominant ideology, being Japanese means speaking Japanese. Speaking another language undermines such an identification. Secondly, Ryukyuan learners are exposed to what Kramsch (2009) describes as “the pain of using a symbolic system that irremediably belongs to others, whose use is to a large extent dictated by others, and that enables them to measure the distance that separates the [present language-learning] Self from the [native speaking] Other.” When applied to language reclamation, this issue becomes yet more complex, because reclaiming Ryukyuan involves stepping out of conventional categories of belonging and membership and of Self and Other. As we will see in this chapter, Ryukyuan language reclaimers perceive Ryukyuan as ‘their language’ from the start. Contrary to learning English, for example, one can regard oneself as a member of Ryukyuan-speaking society but learn to speak Ryukyuan only afterward. Language reclamation is not simply an expansion of a multilingual repertoire: it is a reappropriation of something that was lost, and that should have been maintained (Chap. 7 in this volume).

Ryukyuan languages are sister languages of Japanese. UNESCO distinguished between six Ryukyuan languages (Moseley, 2009).<sup>2</sup> After the military annexation of the Ryukyu Kingdom in 1872 and its forced incorporation into the Meiji state, Japanese administrators declared Ryukyuan languages, cultures, and customs to be epiphenomena of Japanese language, culture, and customs (Oguma, 2001). Japanese academia, particularly linguistics and folklore studies, gave their academic stamp of approval to this view. Ryukyuan languages were declared to be ‘greater dialects’ (*dai-hōgen*) of Japanese, even though no research was launched to support such claims. Rather, research accommodated the political view that the Ryukyus were Japan. Due to their vast difference to Japanese, Ryukyuan languages became subsequently suppressed in manifold and purposeful ways. They were replaced in all public domains

by the 1920s and in the 1950s and 1960s also in private domains such as family and neighborhood (Anderson & Heinrich, 2014). All Ryukyuan language varieties are endangered today, and they are set to become extinct by the mid-century (Heinrich et al., 2015).

As a legacy of Meiji-period ideology, Ryukyuan languages are still framed as ‘Japanese dialects’ by the Japanese state, and they therefore still await their entry into the school education system and can only be learned informally. However, language policies supportive of language reclamation efforts would require ‘languages’ to start with. This leaves language activists with the sole option to contest or resist national language (Japanese) policies and to engage in grassroots activities instead. As an effect, anybody who is reclaiming a Ryukyuan language is involved in grassroots activities and therefore consciously or unconsciously resists national language policies (Heinrich & Ishihara, 2018; Hammine, 2021). Note, however, that Ryukyuan language reclamation is not equally embraced by the entire population of the Ryukyus and that the views and endeavors of our consultants remain exceptional at the time of writing this chapter.

Just like everybody else in Japan, Ryukyuan have been socialized as Japanese, who are widely believed to share (since immemorial times) one language, one culture, and one identity (Befu, 2001). According to such a view, Ryukyuan is Japanese. Letting go of this belief and accepting that young and middle-aged Ryukyuan do not know their own language is painful. Individuals who reclaimed Ryukyuan languages come to perceive themselves differently. They also change their views on the Ryukyus and Japan. Reclaiming Ryukyuan involves thinking about and acting on the Ryukyus, and it is at this nexus that their activities exceed the realm of ‘language learning’ and cross over into ‘language reclamation’.

## Survey and Data

A brief word on our own position. We are Europeans studying the Ryukyus from an area studies perspective. Heinrich has been collaborating with and has sought to support activists in the Ryukyus for the past 20 years, while Valsecchi is new to the field. We support the view that

Ryukyuan should be made available to formal language education, believe that these languages should be maintained, and that academic research should be adapted to support such efforts. We are aware that Indigenous studies require and are best pursued from Indigenous perspectives, and we therefore leave as much space as possible to the words and views of our consultants.

What effects does Ryukyuan language reclamation have on the identity of the individuals engaging in it? What views, beliefs, hopes, and goals are involved? What does it take for attempts to reclaim Ryukyuan to be successful? To answer these questions, we interviewed 13 people who have studied a Ryukyuan language as adults. Ten interviewees are from Okinawa, two are mainland Japanese, and one is a foreign resident in Okinawa (see Table 8.1). We video-recorded and transcribed all interviews, but for interviewee no. 8, who did not want to be recorded. All consultants expressed their consent that we could use the data for academic papers. Some spoke on conditions of anonymity, and we therefore

**Table 8.1** Interviews

ID Acronym	Age	Gender	Interview	Nationality /Identity	Interview date	Duration
OJ-F-30-1	30s	F	English	Okinawan-Japanese	4. March 2021	1h:05min
OJ-M-50	50s	M	Japanese	Okinawan-Japanese	8. March 2021	1h:08min
OJ-F-40-1	40s	F	Japanese	Okinawan-Japanese	9. March 2021	2h:34min
OJ-F-50	50s	F	Japanese	Okinawan-Japanese	10. March 2021	0h:54min
J-F-50	50s	F	English	Japanese	10. + 18. March	2h:01min
FR-M-30	30s	M	English	Dutch	11. March 2021	1h:17min
OJ-F-30-2	30s	F	Japanese	Okinawan-Japanese	11. March 2021	1h:11min
O(A)-M-50	50s	M	Japanese	Okinawan-(American)	15. March 2021	2h:30min
J-M-50	50s	M	Japanese	Japanese	18. March 2021	1h:23min
OJ-F-40-2	40s	F	Japanese	Okinawan-Japanese	23. March 2021	1h:24min
OJ-F-20	20s	F	Japanese	Okinawan-Japanese	26. March 2021	0h:42min
OJ-M-20-1	20s	M	Japanese	Okinawan-Japanese	26. March 2021	0h:43min
OJ-M-20-2	20s	M	Japanese	Okinawan-Japanese	31. March 2021	1h:10min
					<b>Total</b>	18h:02min

anonymized all consultants. We identify them with acronyms, which allow the reader to recognize their nationality/identity, gender, and age. The interviews were semi-structured and conducted in Japanese or in English (refer to the appendix for interview questions and the sentence completion task). Japanese interviews have been translated into English by us.<sup>3</sup>

We apply critical ethnography in our analysis because we seek to explore not simply “what there is” but “what could be” (Thomas, 1993). Doing so allows us to examine actions, attitudes, and ambitions that are otherwise downplayed or concealed by dominant beliefs about language and identity. Critical ethnography is also a fitting approach because Ryukyuan language reclamation is itself an act of exploring ‘what could be’. Language reclamation implies to swim against the current of conformity. It takes strong convictions to keep reclaiming Ryukyuan in the face of dominant views on Japanese society, language, and culture (Fija & Heinrich, 2007; see also Chap. 13).

## Individual Struggle and Change

The study of language endangerment emphasizes that speaking a specific language involves a particular representation of the world. Speakers place themselves in the world differently according to the language they speak. The urgency to combat language loss stems from an understanding that language endangerment results not solely in the loss of a unique representation of the world but also in a loss of placing oneself in a particular way in the world (Harrison, 2007). This means that our consultants are not simply learning to speak Ryukyuan—they are learning it to be (more) Ryukyuan. Practitioners of language reclamation become aware of the gap between who they were in the past and who they aim to become.

Following Kramsch (2009), we refer to the construction of new perceptions and attitudes about oneself as a speaker of a language as the ‘symbolic 2’ function of language. Put simply, in the context of Ryukyuan language reclamation, learning to speak Ryukyuan entails not only acquiring new linguistic structures (symbolic 1). Those who endeavor to use Ryukyuan must also engage in the *deconstruction* and *reconstruction* of

a whole range of things that were once central to their identity (symbolic 2). From an emotional, relational, and embodied point of view, language reclamation is an unsettling experience.

## Learning my Language to Become Myself

*I decided to learn Ryukyuan because it's my language (OJ-F-30-1 and OJ-F-40-1); If I had not learned Ryukyuan, then I would not have found my real self, [...] I would have remained incomplete (OJ-M-50); Studying Ryukyuan languages for me is like becoming myself (O(A)-M-50).* This way of framing Ryukyuan language reclamation is common to our consultants. They had learned foreign languages before, but studying Ryukyuan was different. Foreign language learning involves the acquisition of a symbolic system that belongs to others. With Ryukyuan language reclamation, the symbolic system is perceived as already belonging to the learner, even if it is not yet mastered: *"Oh, I'm from Okinawa but I don't speak like Okinawan people. What happened?" (OJ-F-30-1); I asked myself "why can't I speak Uchinaaguchi [Okinawan language] even if I am Uchinaanchu [Okinawan]?" (OJ-F-40-2).* Ryukyuan is both present and absent in the lives of our consultants, even before they engage in language reclamation. It is their language, but not quite yet. There is a feeling that something is missing or that something has been taken away. *I feel like the ability to speak Uchinaaguchi was taken away from me (OJ-F-50). I had forgotten that something like Ryukyuan languages existed [...]. I always felt Japanese, but something was missing, and I couldn't name it (OJ-F-40-1).* What we have at hand here is not simply a matter of discovering, but one of remembering and *re*-discovering. Ryukyuan language reclamation deals with the *re*-construction of something that has been broken. Reclaiming Ryukyuan *is like reconnecting what was forcefully disconnected (OJ-F-40-1); it's like looking for something that has been lost (OJ-M-50).*

Our consultants framed their efforts of language reclamation as a process of becoming *oneself*. This is different from the expansion of identity through foreign language learning: *Maybe I studied English in order to become American. The same with Japanese. One studies Japanese in order to become even more Japanese. Okinawan is different. I study Okinawan to be*

*myself* (OJ-F-20). Another consultant spoke about *developing another version of me*—a version that was latently already present: *That version already exists in me because I was brought up in that context. I am sure I have that Ryukyuan me. [...]. Speaking or listening to Ryukyuan is like realizing my Ryukyuan self* (OJ-F-40-1). The positive implications of ‘becoming oneself’ also surface in the outcomes of the reclamation process: *Studying Ryukyuan totally matches what I am looking for. It makes me happy. That I am following my own goals. It has liberated me* (OJ-F-20); *Speaking or listening to Ryukyuan is like being relieved, like having hope. It feels like home* (OJ-F-50). Another consultant stated that *I don’t think that there is a societal motivation to learn Ryukyuan. It comes from the inside, from a desire to change personally* (OJ-M-50).

Not everybody is able to undertake the transformation necessary for successful language reclamation. It is this that makes our consultants exceptional in a Ryukyuan setting. One of them, an experienced Okinawan language teacher, told us that *most people will not be able to change identities and language. It takes skills, and also privileges. Most have no choice. They have been born in Japan, and they think of themselves as Japanese, but Ryukyuan language with Japanese identity does not work* (O(A)-M-50). Reclamation requires a fundamental renewal of self-identity.

## Unlearning and Being Rebellious

*I always had a Japanese identity. I did not even think about being Uchinaanchu. This changed when I went to Hawai’i. When asked “where are you from”, I replied “I am Japanese”. One day, I randomly met an old local guy. He asked me “where in Japan are you from?” “Okinawa” I said, and then he went “oh, then you are not Japanese, you are Okinawan”. At first, I did not understand what that was supposed to mean. I felt offended. Back then I knew nothing about Okinawan history and culture. [...] I went like “what?”, but then I started to hang out at sanshin lessons and with the Okinawan community, and it slowly dawned on me “oh that’s what he meant”. Okinawan is different* (OJ-M-20-2). This experience exemplifies the trajectories of many of our consultants. Discovering that they could be (or that they

already are) Ryukyuan strikes them as a radical new realization. *When I went to Tokyo, I was often asked whether I was hāfu [having a Japanese and a non-Japanese parent]. At my university, many students had an international background. Many of my friends were mixed or had international experience. They perceived me as different. They thought that I am not Japanese. I was shocked* (OJ-F-30-1). Language is fundamental in questioning or undoing Japanese identity: *If Uchinaaguchi had been transmitted to me, I might not have said “I am Japanese”* (OJ-M-20-2). When asked to complete the sentence ‘before studying Ryukyuan I was more...’, two consultants said *I was more Japanese-like* (OJ-M-50, OJ-F-40-1).

All consultants agreed that Ryukyuan language reclamation involves to some extent a ‘rebellious spirit’. This poses challenges to language teachers. Unless learners are ready to question their own identity, efforts of studying Ryukyuan will stall: *I don’t teach just language. [...] Okinawan language is identity, but many students are not interested in this. Being Japanese is okay for them. If you believe in the myth of Japan as a monolingual nation, you cannot learn Okinawan. For most students Okinawan is part of Japanese, and they see themselves as Japanese* (O(A)-M-50). We see again the distinction between language learning (remaining as Japanese as before) and language reclamation at work. Reclamation challenges and transforms identities.

Ryukyuan language reclamation can be hard to justify to others. It questions common beliefs about the Ryukyus and its relation to Japan. *There no longer is suppression [...] but one is seen as some sort of a weirdo when speaking the language* (OJ-M-20-2). Some embrace this outsider role: *People think I am weird, but I never wanted to be normal from the beginning* (OJ-F-30-1). Once the language is reclaimed, speaking Ryukyuan can become a rebellious act: *Now I use it on every occasion. Even if I feel uncomfortable. [...] Once we were in a restaurant. They understood the language there, but they did not use it. We started to order in Ryukyuan, and they were like “what’s going on?” We only used Ryukyuan and English, no Japanese. People admire English speakers, and they humiliate people who speak Ryukyuan. But we used both. They did not know how to take it* (OJ-F-40-1).

## Emotional and Relational Change

Ryukyuan language reclamation involves emotions that are usually not triggered by language learning. *Learning Ryukyuan languages for me is like an emotional rollercoaster* (OJ-F-30-1). The spectrum of emotions is wide. For example, sadness emerges when *one comes to understand what has been lost* (OJ-M-50), but reclamation may also involve anger: *It is saddening to learn how Okinawan speakers have been treated in the past and to see the effects of this today. Their inability to speak and their shame to use the language. There is sadness and there is anger* (O(A)-M-50). At the same time, when asked whether Ryukyuan language reclamation contributed to their happiness, 12 out of 13 consultants replied affirmatively. Ryukyuan languages also set off emotional reactions of older full speakers or of non-speakers (Japanese monolinguals): *When I visit families of native speakers in their 80s and 90s, they usually have their sons or daughters serve me tea, and sometimes I feel that they are not happy. Because they don't speak the language, but I speak it. This also makes it difficult to speak the language, because I don't want them to get angry. I think this also makes new speakers or learners drop out. Nobody likes to be hated* (OJ-F-30-1). But things are changing: *When I speak Uchinaaguchi, there are people who think I should not speak it, and I feel affected by their negative reactions. But the majority is happy. I think it is slowly changing* (OJ-F-50). Ryukyuan is also perceived to be more effective than Japanese to express emotions and feelings. This is one of the advantages of speaking Ryukyuan: *I think it is helpful for me to speak Ryukyuan, because I can communicate how I feel* (OJ-F-20); *I can express my real sentiments* (O(A)-M-50). This perception was captured as follows in a comparison between Okinawan and English: *Uchinaaguchi is not just a tool [like English]. I feel like it serves authentic interpersonal communication, communicating with the heart* (OJ-F-F0).

Ryukyuan language reclamation has consequences on interpersonal relations. Reclaiming Ryukyuan implies to confront conflicts with family, partners, colleagues, or community members: *I started being evaluated by my grandmother and by my parents. They told me that I was not good at speaking Uchinaaguchi. Because of these comments, it was hard to speak. When I speak, they point out that something sounded strange, and they speak*

*Japanese to me. It happens often (OJ-F-30-2). Negative reactions may also entail gender dimensions: Women are supposed to speak a lot of polite language, or they are not supposed to speak Ryukyuan altogether because that is 'a very male thing to do' (FR-M-30). Difficulties also manifest because reclaiming Ryukyuan is an investment in one's own identity: I'm looking into my own Ryukyuan roots. I'm in the process of reconstructing everything, including religion. I can still say I am a Muslim, but my understanding of being Muslim is different from that of most people, like my husband's. He feels insecure and threatened because I am becoming someone he doesn't know (OJ-F-40-1). Usually, however, reclaiming Ryukyuan is a means for recreating meaningful relations. Speaking Ryukyuan restores a bond with older generations: If you try to speak with older people in Uchinaaguchi, they will immediately say that you are different. You become sort of popular with them, they say stuff like "you're a good kid". The connection becomes stronger (OJ-M-20-2). This is not always the case as many elders have difficulties coming to terms with their native language, and a sense of shame is hard to overcome. However, speaking Ryukyuan to others engaged in reclamation is always appreciated: When I write something in Uchinaaguchi on Instagram, my friends comment or put a like on it. We encourage each other. To be able to talk about Okinawa and our life as Uchinaanchu in Uchinaaguchi feels really good. Until now, I thought that what I did wasn't really appreciated. But if I actually speak the language, people are very happy. We share this joy (OJ-F-40-2).*

## Societal Struggle and Change

Language reclamation includes a desire for sociopolitical change. All consultants had already developed ideas about this, and they all spoke without hesitation. They thought that there is nothing 'normal' in not speaking one's ancestral language, but this is not what most people think in the Ryukyus (or in Japan). Hence, endangered language reclamation efforts involve a critique of society as it currently is. Languages are endangered because they are placed in a hostile language ecology. Language reclamation entails attempts to change this, and it therefore seeks to integrate nonlinguistic issues (Leonard, 2017). Three larger issues came up in

the interviews: the role of present-day school education; the necessity of decolonization (although not everybody used this term); a desire for more civic engagement for language, culture, and education.

## Speaking Ryukyuan Should be Normal

When asked why she was learning Okinawan, one consultant told us *because it's my language* (OJ-F-40-1). We were also told *I chose to learn Ryukyuan because I am Okinawan* (OJ-F-20). Why should somebody have to rationalize why they want to speak their ancestral language? It should be normal: *Speaking or listening to Ryukyuan is for me something which should be seen as normal for anybody who is Ryukyuan* (OJ-M-20-2). Not everybody sees it this way, though: *In Osaka, it's normal to speak Kansai-ben, but in Okinawa we cannot speak Uchinaaguchi. How comes?* (OJ-M-20-1). The present situation in the Ryukyus is seen as abnormal. *If Okinawan society was healthy, it would be totally normal for its languages to be transmitted. Something is wrong here* (OJ-F-20). Becoming aware of this is part of the individual trajectories. It is the outcome of study and self-reflection. *From 2003 to 2004, I was an exchange student at the University of Hawai'i. I learned about the Hawaiian language revitalization movement, and I asked myself 'Why can't I speak Uchinaaguchi, even if I am Uchinaanchu?'* (OJ-F-40-2). The answer to this is given by another consultant: *When Okinawa came under control from outsiders [in this case mainland Japanese], the view emerged that Okinawan was inferior. I would like to flip this discrimination around and show it has no basis. In that way, one comes to see that the transmission of Ryukyuan is something good* (OJ-M-50).

Not everybody in the Ryukyus (or Japan) understands why Ryukyuan language reclamation matters. Our consultants seek to change this. Education policies and practices are seen as a problem. *Ryukyuan languages did not fade away naturally. It was intentional. Language policies did this, and linguistic imperialism. Okinawan people don't have the chance to learn about this* (OJ-F-40-2). In a similar vein, *the history we learn in school is Japanese history, but we are different. We have our own history. The culture, too, is different, we have our own culture* (OJ-M-20-1). Some were

straightforward. *The main problem of Ryukyuan language learning is the Japanese school system* (O(A)-M-50). A similar opinion was that *there should be more support for Ryukyuan language, because they need more support* (OJ-M-50). The latter statement is obviously true given the fact that Ryukyuan is set to become extinct by mid-century if no countermeasures are taken (Heinrich et al., 2015). Consider the following statement by one consultant who is fluent in English: *Convincing those working in the education sector is difficult. For example, on Irabu Island, they unified all schools into one comprehensive school from elementary to middle school [...]. I suggested that their new school song could also have a version in Irabu-Miyakoan. There are five regional dialects on Irabu. I therefore suggested five verses, one for each dialect. I could then make an English version. "How about this?", I asked. The song would have three different versions, Japanese, Irabu-Miyakoan, and English. The principal said no but asked me if I could help them with their English curriculum. [...] It was awkward* (J-F-50). This anecdote underlines that giving Ryukyuan languages more space, making them more visible, and teaching them, even to a small extent such as in a school song, are hard to realize in the present situation.

## Decolonizing and Recentering the Ryukyus

Decolonization refers to the undoing of domination, including attitudes and beliefs. Consultants talked about this in detail. Some of them were familiar with decolonization theory. *I never thought that speaking Ryukyuan implied discussing decolonization. [...] By speaking Ryukyuan, I hope to psychologically contribute to decolonization* (OJ-F-40-2). There are good reasons to engage in decolonization, because a lingering sense of shame discourages the use of Ryukyuan. *Some people feel embarrassed, they think they are not supposed to speak the language* (J-M-50). *Before learning it, I never thought that speaking Ryukyuan implied overcoming a lot of shame and a sense of inferiority. It is a coming-out, in the literal sense* (FR-M-30). What has been subject to devaluation needs to be reappreciated. Long-standing negative attitudes need to be surmounted. The misconception of a 'monolingual Japan' might have been debunked and discredited in academia, but it remains in the minds of many. *Why did I have to grow up*

*as a Japanese? Why did I have to become Japanese? The answer is because of 1972. Why was there a reversion then? In order to be like the mainland. Economically, too. But if you look at it today, you see that our precious language, culture, and identity have vanished, but that discrimination remained. When I realized this, I could not help but think that something terrible is happening in Okinawa (OJ-M-20-2).*

Consultants believe that reclaiming Ryukyuan contributes to Ryukyuan self-esteem, culture, language, and way of life. *Okinawa has been perceived as something lower. We have been looked at from above. But one can change this by learning and speaking Ryukyuan. By restoring one's language, one can also restore one's self-esteem. One can combat Okinawa's dependency on the mainland, too, and strengthen a spirit of independence (dokuritsushin). In other words, one engages in decolonization (OJ-M-50).* Decolonization, too, is emotionally charged. *When I lived in Yamagata and Tochigi Prefecture, lots of people asked me about Okinawa, but I did not speak the language, nor had I studied its history. I understood that I was ignorant about the things that surrounded me. This kept bugging me (OJ-F-20).* Decolonization is a difficult undertaking in Japan. *To live as a minority in Japan is hard. Questions of diversity and minority rights are ignored. Okinawan people have experienced rejection. They have been singled out for the way they speak Japanese. Now that Okinawans are part of Japan and speak Japanese well, we are telling them 'we are not Japanese, we are Okinawans, we speak Ryukyuan'. I think most are scared by this. They have a trauma. Especially the native speakers (OJ-F-40-2).* These difficulties notwithstanding, the immediate threat to Ryukyuan calls for a fundamental break with prior attempts of language revitalization and for a more radical shift towards language reclamation (see Leonard, 2017). *Ryukyuan languages with Japanese identity do not work. Defending Ryukyuan positions with Japanese identity does not work. [...] The Ryukyus are dominated by Japan and America. Unless this changes, no advances will be made with language (O(A)-M-50).* Some consultants felt that Okinawa Prefecture could take a clearer stance toward the issue of domination, and also toward Ryukyuan. *Words like Uchinaanchu, Uchinaaguchi and shimakutuba [community speech] are easy to use because they are not Japanese [but Okinawan]. If they said words like Ryūkyū shogo [Ryukyuan languages] or senjū minzoku [Indigenous people], they would have to admit that we are*

*a minority in Japan. They [those at the prefecture] are trying to avoid that (OJ-F-40-2).*

Decolonization requires alternative visions for the Ryukyus and its languages. Therein, the Ryukyus are no longer the periphery of Japan. They constitute an independent geographical and cultural center. *The Uchinaanchu spirit, the Uchinaanchu way of thinking is addressed today under the assumption of Okinawa being (in) Japan (Nihon no naka no Okinawa) – as if Okinawa was the deep countryside of Japan. If Uchinaaguchi was again used in everyday life, we could again think about Okinawa as Okinawa (Okinawa o chūshin ni). If we did not think of having to match Japanese standards all the time, if we focused more on Okinawa, our self-confidence would increase (OJ-F-40-2).* Language is seen as a good starting point. *At present, Okinawa society is operating within the Japanese system. I don't think this system matches us. There are problems of education, economy, development, military bases, and so on, and there are inevitably conflicting views if you discuss these things in Okinawa. However, I don't think that anybody would be against maintaining Ryukyuan. All agree that this would be good. Maybe one should start with language and then address one issue after the other? One could reform the societal system step by step, change it in a way that suits our way of life. Also in this sense, one's language is important (OJ-F-20).*

Attempts to maintain Ryukyuan without efforts of decolonization are perceived as ineffective. *There are training courses for learning and teaching Uchinaaguchi at the Center for Community Language. Pronunciation and grammar are studied there, but before turning to grammar one needs to understand the present state of the Ryukyuan languages. Why are they in decline, and why do we want them to survive (OJ-F-40-2).* Such efforts require a reevaluation of language utility. *In the current political and ideological frame, benefits of speaking Ryukyuan are superficial. Language services and workplaces that require Okinawan need to be created, work that pays a decent salary. Okinawan on your CV gets you nowhere today (O(A)-M-50).* Others seek to depart from existing values, pointing out that Ryukyuan perspectives contribute to wellbeing. *If we started to think from the perspective of Okinawa, we could build a better society. We were born and raised here. Our language exists here. With this kind of awareness, Okinawa would be properly appreciated. If everybody looked at their own*

*village [and not always compare it to mainland Japan], they would understand that it does make sense to live here. We could make Okinawa a better place, a happier place (OJ-F-40-2).*

## Ryukyuan Studies and Language Reclamation Henceforth

Critical reflection about the Ryukyus affects perceptions of Ryukyuan language studies. *I am first an activist and then a teacher. I don't just teach language (O(A)-M-50)* is the strongest statement we collected. This attitude is driven by the desire *to make Okinawans feel Okinawan (O(A)-M-50)*. Learners hope that their efforts of reclaiming Ryukyuan will have positive effects on society at large. *I feel like I am contributing to Okinawa. [...] In this sense, I am glad that I am learning the language (OJ-F-30-2)*. Maintaining the languages for future generations is another motive. *I chose to learn Ryukyuan because I wanted to pass it on to young people... and because it's fun (OJ-F-50)*. Reclaiming Ryukyuan involves civic engagement. *By speaking Ryukyuan, I hope I can contribute to bring back Okinawa for Okinawan people (OJ-M-50)*. Such engagement transcends Ryukyuan languages. *By speaking Ryukyuan, I hope to raise awareness, to stand with people who are marginalized. [...] This is the number one thing I want to achieve by speaking Ryukyuan (OJ-F-40-1)*. This form of engagement can transcend the Ryukyus and Japan. *Learning Ryukyuan is also about justice. I now feel emotionally more connected to people who experience injustice in general. Not only in Japan, but around the world [...]. By speaking Ryukyuan, I hope I can contribute to a better future (OJ-F-30-1)*.

Advocacy for Ryukyuan and demanding more space in education and in everyday life are often portrayed as 'political' endeavors, while the 'Okinawa-is-Japan' approach is not. Some of our consultants thought this to be naïve. *Political? The question to ask is 'what do you mean by political?' Calling Ryukyuan hōgen [dialect of Japanese] is political. To think that one is Japanese is political. Everything is political. It would be good if academics would be more political. Anyhow, that's what I am doing (OJ-M-20-2)*. Research on Ryukyuan languages that does not purposefully contribute to a reevaluation of the Ryukyus is seen to have little impact.

*Without addressing the political implications, nothing will change. Always excluding anything that could be political – you cannot revitalize language like this. One just creates data in the service of the Japanese. It just creates publications on which careers are built* (OJ-M-20-2). Another consultant thought that *everything in research is for the Japanese* (O(A)-M-50). In their view, reclaiming an endangered language calls for an intellectually autonomous framework. Such a framework would incorporate the results of decolonization.

## Outlook

Reclaiming Ryukyuan shapes subjective realities such as attitudes, perceptions and values that belong to the Ryukyus. Ryukyuan language reclamation implies to disconnect from a former identity as Japanese-speaking Japanese and from the dominant view of Ryukyu-as-Japan. Language reclamation requires recentering the Ryukyus as an independent linguistic and cultural realm. No longer at the periphery of the Japanese Archipelago, speaking Ryukyuan then entails a new sense of being in the world and of acting upon it. Language reclamation is an act of liberation. Its practitioners do not care so much if their ‘Japaneseness’ is being questioned or not. They want to be Ryukyuan. For them, the task of passing as bona fide Japanese, which led directly to unfavorably comparing the Ryukyus to the mainland, has come to an end. Trying to be ‘like everybody else’ in Japan inevitably results in cultural loss. Reclamation is not a backwards-oriented activity. Its practitioners display cosmopolitan and transcultural attitudes when forging new pathways into a future that is more rewarding, just, and culturally rich. In doing so, they set an example for others to follow, inside and outside of the Ryukyus and of Japan. Reclaiming Ryukyuan languages opens new possibilities, and it fundamentally changes identities. Ryukyuan languages are essential for this new sense of being, for looking back, for looking ahead, and ultimately to transform and enrich society.

## Appendix

### Open Questions

1. How long have you been interested in learning Ryukyuan? When did you start to become more serious about learning it? What happened then?
2. What languages did you study before learning Ryukyuan? Do you think that this experience had an impact on why you learned Ryukyuan? Did this experience also influence your studies of Ryukyuan?
3. The majority never learns Ryukyuan languages. Why is it you who is learning Ryukyuan (as opposed to all those who do not?). Does learning Ryukyuan involve emotions? Do you feel rebellious about learning Ryukyuan?
4. What is for you different in learning a foreign language like English and learning Ryukyuan? Is it more difficult to learn Ryukyuan? More fun? Why?
5. In the past, people in the Ryukyus were discouraged to speak their language. Do you feel an effect thereof when learning Ryukyuan?
6. What's the benefit of speaking Ryukyuan (vs., e.g., English) for you? Do your friends and family also benefit from it? Does Ryukyuan society benefit from it?
7. Do you think that individual acts of learning and speaking Ryukyuan can contribute to social, cultural, or political change?
8. Do you think that your status in society changed due to speaking Ryukyuan? Did you expect a change of status?
9. Does learning Ryukyuan invite you to reflect on larger issues (e.g., race, gender, class, and social justice)?
10. Can we ask you something very personal? On a scale from 1 to 10, how happy do you feel now? Does speaking Ryukyuan contribute to this sense of happiness?

## Sentence Completion Task

1. When I think of Ryukyuan, my first memory is ...
2. I chose to learn Ryukyuan because ....
3. Learning Ryukyuan for me is like ....
4. Speaking or listening to Ryukyuan for me is like ....
5. When I speak or listen to Ryukyuan, I become more ....
6. I use some Ryukyuan when ...
7. I think it is helpful for me to speak Ryukyuan because ....
8. I think Ryukyuan language can do .... better than Japanese language.
9. The main problem of Ryukyuan language learning is ....
10. I wish there would be more support for Ryukyuan language because ....
11. Before I studied Ryukyuan, I was more ....
12. If I had not learnt Ryukyuan, then ....
13. By learning Ryukyuan, I want to become more ....
14. Before learning it, I never thought that speaking Ryukyuan implied ...
15. By speaking Ryukyuan, I hope I can contribute to ....

## Notes

1. Madoka Hammine shared her conceptualization of language reclamation with us. We are grateful for her suggestions and help. We are also indebted to the editors of this book for their thoughtful comments on earlier versions of this chapter. Research and writing of this chapter have been equally shared between us. The author order simply reflects the alphabetical order of our family names.
2. In the following, we use the generic term ‘Ryukyuan’ to refer to the six Ryukyuan languages which are themselves made up of about 700 local varieties. Note that ‘Okinawan’ is but one Ryukyuan language. The heavy emphasis on Okinawan in Ryukyuan Studies, including in this chapter, should not mislead readers to think that these issues can only be studied with regard to Okinawan. On the contrary, much more research should be devoted to the remaining five Ryukyuan languages.
3. Yumiko Ohara kindly read and discussed our interview questions before we conducted the interviews.

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