

LANGUAGE DIVERSITY IN JAPAN: SOCIOLINGUISTIC EXPLORATIONS IN TOKYO'S AMEYOKO SHOPPING STREET AND YOMITAN VILLAGE IN OKINAWA

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Abstract

Today, Japan's linguistic diversity is no longer disputed. Linguistic diversity includes autochthonous languages such as Ainu, Ryukyuan or Japanese Sign Language; community languages from immigrants such as Korean, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Nepalese; and religious languages such as Sanskrit or Latin (Maher 2022). Japanese is also diverse and includes regional variation employed in constantly evolving new contexts filled with new social meanings (Kobayashi 2018). It is an important achievement of Japanese sociolinguistic research of the past decades that Japan's long-standing monolingual and monocultural myth has been debunked. At the same time, linguistic diversity and multilingualism often remain poorly understood. In this article, I explore some aspects of the versatility and benefits of Japan's linguistic diversity by zooming in on two specific cases. First, I report on language use in a shopping street in northeast Tokyo (Ameyoko) and then explore the nexus between different language repertoires and life evaluations in an Okinawan village (Yomitan).

Keywords: Linguistic diversity, sociolinguistics, Ryukyuan languages, metrolingualism, tourism

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Introduction¹

It was not so long ago that research into Japanese multilingualism was mainly insisting that multilingualism also existed in Japan (e.g., Maher 1995), contradicting views such as that of the seminal Japanese sociolinguists Shibata Takeshi (1985: 88), who had stated, like many others at the time, that neither migrant nor indigenous languages existed in Japan. While this view sometimes continues to emerge in comments of politicians such as Asō Tarō, Prime Minister from 2008–2009 (Yamaguchi 2020), the monolingual myth has been debunked across all fields of Japanese linguistics today (see, e.g., Bugaeva 2022; Heinrich, Miyara, and Shimoji 2015; Maher 2022). Sociolinguistic research on Japan has moved on to new tasks, and it more closely resembles today that of other countries. In this paper, I illustrate this with reference to two topics in which I have myself been engaged: the study of urban multilingualism – a key issue in international sociolinguistics (Smakman and Heinrich 2016) – and the effect of language endangerment on well-being, a currently emerging new research paradigm (Heinrich 2023). Before discussing these two topics, let us consider some general background of Japan's linguistic diversity.

Language diversity in contemporary Japan

Japan's Immigration Services Agency (2022) reports that there are about three million immigrants in Japan today, nearly double the number of immigrants in Japan in 2000. Still, with a population of 125 million, immigrants in Japan account for only 2.3% of the entire population, a comparatively low number for the third-largest economy in the world. On the other hand, Japan's low ratio of immigrants is not exceptional for the region. According to the United Nations (2021), South Korea has a share of 2.6% of immigrants, and the People's Republic of China 0.1%. These numbers are considerably lower than the medium percentage of OECD member states (9.7%). In Japan, the most numerous immigrant nationalities are Chinese (745,000), Vietnamese (475,000), South Korean (410,000), Filipino (290,000), and Brazilian (290,000). Migrants mostly settle in Tokyo Metropolis, where we find 19.1% of all immigrants to Japan, followed by Aichi Prefecture (9.5%), Osaka (8.9%), and then Kanagawa (8%). In other words,

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we find large numbers of immigrants in and around Japan's major cities. Many immigrants are already multilingual upon their arrival to Japan. According to Ethnologue, China possesses 11 institutional languages and 270 additional languages, South Korea has three languages, Vietnam 93, the Philippines 175, and Brazil 202 (Eberhard, Simmons, and Fennig 2023). The exact number of languages known and spoken in Japan is therefore unknown, but we can safely assume that several hundred languages are spoken in places like Tokyo. Japan's diversity is also in itself diversifying. Inter-marriage between Japanese and foreign nationals accounts today for 4% of all marriages, and there is a growing number of bilingual children who grow up in international families. One out of 29 children born in Japan has a foreign parent today, a rate which is notably higher in large cities such as Tokyo (Farrer 2018: 204).

Japanese nationals are also linguistically diverse, and they have always been. In the Ryukyu Islands, in the southwest of the Japanese Archipelago, we find six distinct Ryukyuan languages. They are genealogically related to Japanese but do not allow for mutual intelligibility with it (Jarosz 2017). Natural intergenerational language transmission in the Ryukyus was interrupted in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and by now, two generations have been raised without active knowledge of these languages (Heinrich 2015). Standard Japanese is commonly spoken across the archipelago, together with a contact variety popularly called *Uchinaa-Yamatoguchi* (Okinawan Japanese) or, linguistically more precisely, *Ryukyu-substrate-Japanese* (Anderson 2015). At the northern end of the archipelago, we find linguistic diversity in Hokkaido, Sakhalin, and the Kurile Islands (the latter two are now part of Russia). These islands were colonized by Japan after the Meiji Restoration of 1868, but they have been inhabited for centuries by the Ainu population. The Ainu languages, sometimes called the Ainuic language family (Janhunen 2022: 59–60), are genealogically unrelated to Japanese. Natural intergenerational language transmission in Ainu was interrupted much earlier than in the Ryukyus. Kurile Ainu became extinct in the 1950s, and Sakhalin Ainu in the 1990s. Hokkaido Ainu has no first-language speakers left, but the number of L2 speakers is growing (Ohara and Okada 2022). Finally, we find Hachijo Island and the Ogasawara Islands in the east of the Japanese Archipelago. The sole surviving variety of Eastern Old Japanese, spoken on Hachijo, is considered a distinct language. The Hachijo language is endangered and spoken by less than 2,000 speakers today (Iannucci 2019). On the Ogasawara Islands, a group of Europeans, Americans, and Pacific Islanders arrived in 1830 and developed an English-based Creole. In 1876, the islands became part of the modern Japanese state, and the original settlers were quickly outnumbered. Following WWII,

the Ogasawara Islands were occupied by the US. Contact between military servicemen and the descendants of the original settlers led to a decreolization process of the Ogasawara Creole (Long 2007). Japanese Sign Language adds to Japan’s linguistic diversity. The Deaf are generally literate in Japanese, making them a significant and proactive bilingual community in Japan (Nakamura 2006). What is also remarkable about the Deaf in Japan is that there exists a substantial number of CODA (Children of Deaf Adults) as well as a population of highly fluent second language signers and interpreters. Therefore, the sociolinguistic situation of Japanese Sign Language differs from other Japanese minority languages in Japan (Oka 2022). Last but not least, Japan also has a robust history of pidgins and creoles (Maher 2004).

Tourism adds further to linguistic diversity and the possibility of encountering individuals who speak different languages in Japan. In 2024, Japan had a record of 35 million visitors – a notable increase compared to 8 million visitors in 2010. China, South Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong provide the most tourists. Tourists mostly visit the Kantō region, where Tokyo is located, and the Kansai region, where we find Osaka, Kyoto, and Nara. Overall, we can state that a considerable number of Japanese nationals and all foreign residents are multilingual. However, keep in mind that linguistic diversity in Japan is less prominent than in other parts of the world. In Table 1, we find the linguistic diversity in Japan with the People’s Republic of China (PRC), the Republic of China (Taiwan, ROC), and South Korea, which I contrast here with the equivalent data of Poland and Italy (Eberhard, Simmons, and Fennig 2023).

Table 1. Linguistic diversity in East Asia, Poland, and Italy

Country	PRC	ROC	Japan	South Korea	Poland	Italy
Linguistic diversity index	0,521	0,489	0,035	0,010	0,050	0.460
Rank worldwide	89	103	211	221	204	112

The linguistic diversity index calculates the possibility of an individual encountering a person speaking a different language, with the lowest possible score being 0 (everybody speaks the same language) and the highest being 1 (everybody speaks a different language). Japan is one of the linguistically least diverse countries in the world, ranking 211th among 232 countries. Even less diverse is South Korea, which only has two Indigenous

minority languages, Jejuan, and Korean Sign Language. Poland's linguistic diversity is similar to that of Japan in that it has a relatively small number of spoken minority languages (e.g., Kashubian, Lower Silesian, Silesian, Wymysorys), plus Polish Sign Language (see Moseley 2020; Eberhard, Simmons, and Fennig 2023). Italy has, according to Ethnologue, a total of 27 living languages, including two distinct sign languages.

Overall, Japan has much more linguistic diversity than is commonly assumed, and this is particularly true for large urban conglomerates. Next, let us consider what this implies for intercultural encounters in the public sphere in Tokyo.

The city as a multilingual palimpsest: Ameyoko shopping street

Once we accept that linguistic diversity is a feature of Tokyo, we can shift focus away from demolinguistic practices of naming, locating, and classifying the languages spoken in the city and start studying how Tokyo's multilingualism manifests, when, where, and to what effect. Cities are an important locus for the sociolinguistic study of multilingualism. Life in cities is said to be “so significantly distinct that it represents a whole new form of social relations” (Archer 2013: 1), and the “interplay of languages within the city contributes to its distinctive feel, its particular sensibility, the ways in which knowledge in and of it is shaped” (Simon 2016: 5). The abundance of languages, semiotic resources, encounters, and behavioral norms makes cities feel citylike. Cities are places where strangers meet. City people learn how to get along under conditions of diversity. All of this is also the case for language life in Tokyo.

Consider first how multilingualism can be explored in contemporary sociolinguistic research. In his 2018 book on multilingualism, Florian Coulmas asked 20 colleagues about their definition of multilingualism. This is what Riikka Lämsäsalmi told him (Coulmas 2018: 36): “Multilingualism is often associated with a kind of parallel monolingualism (in major World/European Languages), be it at the (educated) individual or in society at large, inspired by prescriptive, educational, societal and political ideologies, and ignoring the creativity, versatility and real-life unboundedness of ordinary human interaction”. Urban linguistic diversity necessitates taking the perspectives identified by Lämsäsalmi because linguistic diversity cannot be simply tied to geographic space, social strata or distinct generations. In large cities, typical demolinguistic practices such as mapping language across geographic space, counting languages or identifying set domains of language use cannot grasp the mobility of language, its piecemeal acquisi-

tion, the employment of linguistic features across language boundaries, the resultant contested meanings, nor the employment of the contextual and spatial resources that are characteristic of urban language life (Smakman and Heinrich 2016).

Tokyo, the largest urban conglomerate in the world, is an excellent place to shift attention from the so-called static ‘sociolinguistics of distribution’ to the more dynamic ‘sociolinguistics of mobile linguistic items’ that are employed in specific social spaces (Blommaert 2010; Pennycook and Otsuji 2015). Script, media, gestures, postures, objects or physical space are included in such a sociolinguistic approach because the principles that guide linguistic behaviors and interactional models can be extended to mediated language use or non-linguistic elements, too (Fox, Mondada, and Sorjonen 2023). The city we call ‘Tokyo’ today has been a place of contact, concentration, and sociolinguistic change for many centuries. Contact and diversification accelerated in the modern period when the migrants from across the Japanese Archipelago and from the colonies settled there. Consequently, the city grew from about one million inhabitants in the 1870s to ten million by the 1940s. Linguistic outsiders continued to arrive after 1945 – first Japanese nationals during the high economic growth period of the 1960s, and from the 1990s onwards, also foreign nationals (Heinrich and Yamashita 2018: 130–133). Today, Greater Tokyo has about 37 million inhabitants, and it is one of the central command centers of the global economy.

In the spring of 2023, I studied communicative encounters in Ameya Yokochō, henceforth ‘Ameyoko’, as Tokyoites usually call it. Ameyoko is a shopping street in Tokyo’s Taitō Ward. It is just across the street from Ueno station.² I studied the linguistic landscape and soundscape on Ameyoko, which has a total length of 450 meters and where bits and pieces of language are employed to resolve communicative problems.³ Urban spaces are particularly insightful for such study because its inhabitants and visitors “come into daily contact with strangers having different belief systems, behavioral norms, day-to-day rituals, and linguistic practices, and they must somehow learn ‘to get along’ for the city to function” (Smakman and Heinrich 2016: 2–3).

² It is important to remember in the discussions that follow that numerous cities in Japan have shopping streets similar to Tokyo’s Ameyoko. Examples include Kichijoji’s Harmonica Yokocho, Hiroshima’s West Market, or Fukuoka’s Yoshizuka Market. The latter is full of Bengali, Vietnamese, and Chinese shops jostling and shouting – with a Sri Lankan Buddhist statue in the middle.

³ For a pioneering study of what became to be termed later linguistic landscape, see Fishman, Cooper, and Conrad (1977), and for a pioneering study of urban soundscape in Tokyo, see Pennycook and Otsuji (2014).

The area where Ameyoko is located burned down during the Great Tokyo Air Raids of 1942, and the old entertainment quarter that was there before was quickly replaced with various black markets. One of them was called Ameya Yokochō (literally, ‘Candy-store side-alley’) because it had stalls selling *imo-ame*, sweets made from potato starch (Seidensticker 2010: 426–427). Today, Ameyoko is on the bucket list of many tourists, and the Japan National Tourist Organization promotes it as a space where “you can find many bargains on almost everything. This makes for plenty of lively interaction not typical of most retail in Japan, so enjoy” (JNTO, not dated, American English site). As Ameyoko changed over time, each foregone period left its spatial, demographic, and (socio)linguistic mark. We find side-by-side remnants of the booming postwar Showa period (1926–1989) and the internationalizing Heisei period (1989–2019) in this shopping street today. There are military goods stores, fishmongers, fruit vendors, sports shops, drug stores, shops selling replica watches, Kebab stands, shot bars, ethnic grocery stands, etc. Just as these different shops and their products have emerged historically, their typical customers have been socialized at different times, and with different attitudes, and they interact with each other differently. Therefore, we encounter a plethora of different people with different behavioral norms, linguistic registers, and communicative expectations in Ameyoko.

Let us first consider urban multilingualism as a manifestation in the linguistic landscape of Ameyoko. Privately written signs, as opposed to official signs, tend to be more open to multilingualism and innovative language use (Backhaus 2006). Among these private signs, ad-hoc signs, written on the spot to resolve some information or interaction problem, are particularly insightful in understanding what languages are used (and expected to be known) in public spaces. Ad-hoc signs address matters important enough to put up a sign to start with and urgent enough to put it up immediately. No time is wasted to design and commercially manufacture a new sign carefully. However, ‘ad-hoc’ does not mean that these signs are idiosyncratic. Like all signs, such signs’ production, creation, and reception transcend the moment when it is captured in a linguistic landscape survey. The problem that any sign seeks to regulate is always located in the past, and the production of a sign aims to regulate this problem for the future. Signs that state, for example, ‘No bargaining’ must have been created because there have been attempts of bargaining in the past, and the production of a sign that states ‘No bargaining’ thus wants to ensure that such behavior can henceforth be avoided. This ‘passage of time’ lifts this sign out of the individual and situated production and projects it to a higher societal scale. Such a sign can be seen as an indication of social expectations in a given public space.

The linguistic landscape is thus also a means of ‘conducting conduct’ or of ‘translating conduct’ into a desired outcome (Heinrich 2021). This desire to regulate behavior through the linguistic landscape underlines the importance of language in the constitution of social space. Consider one concrete example of how this is done in Ameyoko.

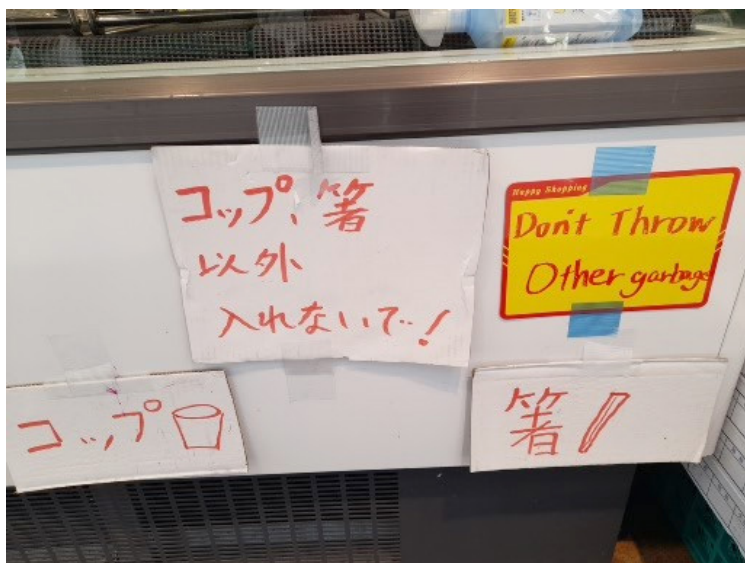


Figure 1. Don't throw other garbage

Source: Picture taken by the author, March 2023.

This sign, located in the middle part of the shopping street, instructs customers how to dispose of their trash. It reads, in Japanese, <*koppu, hashi / igai / irenaide!*> (Don't dispose of anything but cups and chopsticks!). Below, we find the words <*koppu*> (cups) and <*hashi*> (chopsticks), accompanied by hand-drawn depictions of these two objects. Added afterward, we find a sign that reads <*Don't Throw Other garbage*>. We know it has been added afterwards because <*other*> refers pragmatically to 'other than the objects mentioned and depicted before', i.e., cups and chopsticks. Also, the English sign disrupts the symmetric spatial arrangement between the three original Japanese signs. There is also an asymmetry between the informa-

tion given to those who speak Japanese, those who only speak English, and those who speak neither of the two languages.

Let us begin with those who can read Japanese. They obtain information on where to dispose of cups and chopsticks. This is vital information for those who consume beverages and food there. The English sign that admonishes visitors to not dispose of other trash in these two bins is most likely not addressing them. It is common knowledge in the Japanese public sphere that one disposes only of the trash indicated in a given bin, and nothing else. Typical cases where such behaviors are practiced are the bins placed next to vending machines selling beverages, where one is expected to only dispose of empty cans or bottles. Bins in public spaces may be used differently outside of Japan, and this has, most likely, led to instances where foreign visitors disposed of trash other than chopsticks and cups in the two bins below the sign in Figure 1. This, in turn, must have necessitated a new sign in English that informed non-Japanese visitors of the market and told them not to dispose of ‘other garbage’. This sign is written in English, a language that those who do not conform to the rule of only disposing of cups and chopsticks here are supposed or expected to know. It is not necessarily a language with which the author of the sign is most comfortable communicating. As a matter of fact, we find a conceptual translation from Japanese to English here. The Japanese expression *hoka no gomi o sutenai* directly lurks behind this English sign, i.e., ‘don’t throw other garbage’. An L1 English sign would probably frame this request positively, resulting in something like ‘for used chopsticks and cups only’, or it would use ‘trash’ instead of ‘garbage’ on the lexical level. Ad-hoc signs are not a language test, though. They use language to address problems other than language via language, and the problem is clearly communicated in Figure 1. Communication and not grammar counts in urban ad-hoc multilingualism. Those who speak neither Japanese nor English are left with two semiotic resources to guide their behavior in front of the trash bins. They can interpret the drawn depiction of the chopsticks and the cups. Secondly, trash-filled bins also carry meaning. It suffices to look into the trash bins to understand how they are supposed to be used. This latter point underlines that urban multilingualism is not simply about language but involves everything that carries semiotic information. Urban sociolinguistics also involves the sociolinguistics of things.

Let us next turn to an example of spoken interaction to see how urban sociolinguistics in Ameyoko manifests. Not all interactions are multilingual, of course, and we also find the employment of specific registers of Japanese. Let us consider an example of Japanese here. We can still find many stores on this shopping street reminiscent of its history as a former

black market during the Allied Occupation Period (1945–1952). Bargains can be made in Ameyoko, and products on the fringes of legality can be purchased. During my fieldwork, I observed the following interaction. In the middle of the market, a young man considers buying a replica watch from a middle-aged male vendor. This transaction requires discussions about such products' nature, origin, and legality. The watches are on display during their discussions. Both interactants move between informal and formal styles (*da de-arū / desu-masu*). They speak quickly and sometimes overlap. Standing next to them, I can overhear how they discuss how some watches feature brand marks in addition to the brand name and how copying watches with brand marks is a problem. The vendor informs the client that 'brands like Franck Muller or [Louis] Vuitton cannot be copied' (*Viton to ka, furanku myura to ka, nakanaka mane dekinai desuyo*), which is why he does not sell these watches. Creating replica versions is possible if the watch features only the name. The vendor adds that 'this [issue] went to court' (*kore wa saiban nattan desuyo*) and that 'brands like Vuitton or Corum are fussy' (*Viton toka, Korumu toka nee, aayu burando urusain desu*). In this interaction, case particles are omitted (*saiban [ni] nattan, aayu burando [wa] urusain*), emphasis is added by *-n/no*, backchanneling is vivid, and some expressions are picked up and repeated *uttaetan desu* ([they] have been sued), *eh uttaeta*, *heee* [what, have been sued, unbelievable!]. The atmosphere is congenial. Their discussion reproduces Ameyoko as a space that is not necessarily operating along the lines of law. Their specific repertoire allows for the discussion of potentially grey legal topics. We find in this interaction an ideological link between the specific linguistic register they use and the nature of their interaction. Both interlocutors are equally able to recognize this and act accordingly. Also, the concrete physical space is part and parcel of such interaction. This conversation would have evolved differently if they had not had the watches in front of them, had been in a quieter space, or had the products on sale been legally less controversial. Their use of language is thus topical, social, and spatial. If we now return to Länssalmi's definition of multilingualism, then we can see how multilingualism in urban settings such as in the Ameyoko shopping street involves "creativity, versatility and real-life unboundedness of ordinary human interaction" (Coulmas 2018: 36).

We can see in these two selected vignettes how language in the city is always situated and how different languages, registers, and types of interaction coexist. Knowledge and proficiency of such languages, registers, and types of interaction differ among those populating public spaces, making linguistic encounters in cities hard to predict. Linguistically navigating through urban space also requires specific urban attitudes to get things done.

Studying urban language life requires a shift away from the sociolinguistics of distribution. This, in turn, requires us to develop new research projects and to design new research methodologies.

Another sociolinguistic field in which we see such new developments is the study of language endangerment, revitalization, and reclamation. Let us next turn to the case of the Ryukyuan languages of Japan, where we can similarly engage in entirely new and unprecedented research projects now that we no longer must debate the existence of multilingualism in Japan but can take this fact as our starting point.

Language matters: Language and well-being in the Ryukyus

Let us now turn to the southwest of the Japanese Archipelago, where we find an entirely different multilingual setting. The Ryukyu Islands are home to most of Japan's autochthonous linguistic diversity. The fact that Okinawan (Uchinaaguchi), the language under investigation here, is 'definitely endangered' (Niinaga, Ishihara, and Nishioka 2014) implies that we find, side by side, different types of speakers in the local communities there. These types of speakers include 'full speakers' of Okinawan, 'rusty speakers' who are insecure about using the language in higher domains and are not confident about using Okinawan honorific language (Van der Lubbe, Tsutsui-Billins, and Heinrich 2021), 'passive bilinguals' who through exposure of the language in their childhood understand Okinawan but never learned to speak it productively, and, finally, 'monolinguals' who neither speak nor understand Okinawan (Anderson 2015).

There are many good reasons to suspect a possible interrelation between language repertoires and well-being in an endangered language setting. It has been noted that communities undergoing language shift and loss often face societal problems, or, in other words, they are not doing well. Their life expectancy is often shorter, they do not do equally well in climbing the educational and professional ladders, or they often remain subject to poverty, exclusion, and discrimination (Heinrich 2023; Onai 2018). We also find relations between language and well-being in public health studies. For example, Hallet, Chandler and Lalonde (2007) report that Aboriginal youth in Australia who maintained their ancestral language showed notably lower rates of suicide, while Oster et al. (2014) found that the maintenance of the ancestral language among Canada's first nation correlated with lower rates of diabetes. Such findings prompt the question of whether maintaining an ancestral language may also correlate with different rates of subjective well-being. In pursuing this question, I collaborated with Yomitan Village

in Okinawa in a questionnaire survey. Yomitan is located about 25 kilometers north of the prefectural city of Naha and has 40,500 inhabitants. The survey was conducted in May 2022, and a total of 1,374 responses were collected.

In the survey, we asked two sets of questions about the degrees of Ryukyuan bilingualism, which we defined as the independent variable. For the dependent variable, we used existing instruments for measuring well-being: the Subjective Happiness Scale, the Satisfaction with Life Scale, and the Scale of General Life Satisfaction. We also asked questions on possible mediating and moderating variables, but we will exclude these due to space limitations here. Through the answers to our language use questions, we understand that Okinawan is rarely used.

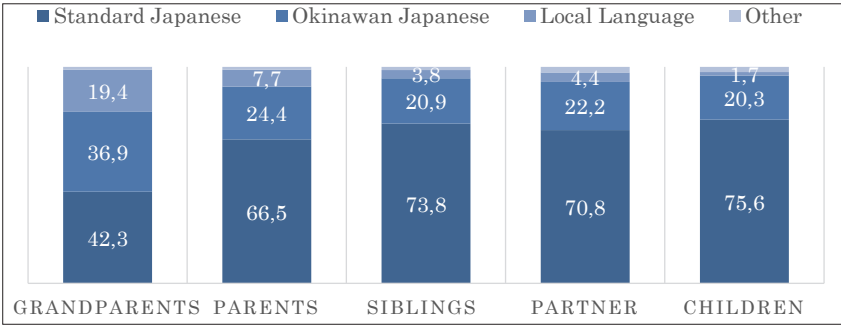


Figure 2. Language choices in the family in Yomitan Village

The order of the languages is, from below, Standard Japanese, Okinawan-Substrate Japanese (Uchinaa Yamatoguchi), Okinawan (called *shimakutuba* ‘community language’ in the survey), and other languages. We see that Standard Japanese is today the dominating language in the family, followed by Okinawan-Substrate Japanese, and only then by Okinawan. Furthermore, the rate of Okinawan language use decreases between generations. It is often used towards grandparents, then parents, partner/spouse, siblings, and finally children. Note that the numbers above give percentages and not total numbers and that ‘children’, for example, might be 50 years or older, depending on the respondent’s age. In any case, this simple data already reveals that Okinawan has largely fallen out of use in the family

domain, which is why villagers from the middle or the young generation never had the opportunity to learn their ancestral language.

Limited use of Okinawan in the family notwithstanding, we find several full and rusty speakers and many passive monolinguals in Yomitan Village. The question of whether one could speak Okinawan (*shimakutuba*) in everyday life resulted in the following data.

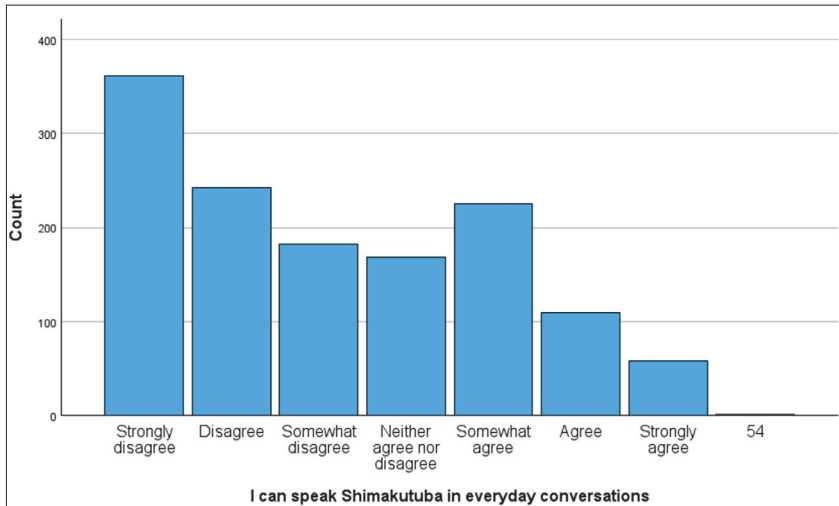


Figure 3. Can you use the local language in everyday life?

We can see here that the largest number of respondents either ‘strongly disagreed’ or ‘disagreed’ with the question of whether they could use Okinawan (*shimakutuba*). We can assume that these respondents are monolinguals. Those who responded ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ can be regarded as full or rusty) speakers, and everybody else as passive bilingual. 54 respondents gave no valid answer to this question.

Let us now consider the results of the questions on subjective well-being. For the sake of brevity, we will only consider the results for General Life Satisfaction here. This survey instrument consists of one single but internationally widely used question (Gallup 2024): “Please imagine a ladder with steps numbered from zero at the bottom to 10 at the top. The top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you and the bottom of the ladder represents the worst possible life for you. On which step of the ladder would you say you personally feel you stand at this time?” The average value for

Yomitan Village in our survey was 6.2, a rate that is slightly higher than that of Japan which stands at 6.06 (Helliwell et al. 2022). However, if we distinguish general life satisfaction between different speaker types, we come up with the results given in Table 4.

Table 4. General life satisfaction according to speaker type

Okinawan speakers	Passive bilinguals	Monolingual Japanese speakers
6.67 [.012]	6.12 [.836]	6.14 [.421]

We can recognize two important things in Table 4. First, speakers of Okinawan are notably more satisfied with their lives than passive bilinguals and monolinguals. Secondly, there is no difference between passive bilinguals and monolinguals – both speaker types are very close to the national average of 6.06 for general life satisfaction. The numbers in square brackets are the p-value, the result of the statistical test that indicates the probability of this finding (chi-square test). [.012] for Okinawan speakers means that the association between language repertoire and life satisfaction might be random for 1 out of 100 informants, a value strong enough to claim that we can rule out that there is no relation between language repertoire and life satisfaction; the p-value for passive bilinguals [.836] and monolinguals [.421] is high, and we cannot refute the hypothesis that the relation between language and well-being is unrelated.

We can take away three more insights if we focus on these findings. Firstly, it is remarkable that residents of Yomitan Village do not report lower rates of life satisfaction than all Japanese nationals. This shows, at first sight, that the assimilation of Ryukyuan into the Japanese nation has been successful from this point of view. On the other hand, and secondly, speakers of Ryukyuan report a notably higher rate of life satisfaction, which means that Ryukyuan and (mainland) Japanese differ in terms of life satisfaction. Complete linguistic assimilation resulted in a decrease in well-being, as speakers of Ryukyuan report a rate of life satisfaction that is more than 0.5 higher (or 5%) than that of non-speakers (passive bilinguals and monolinguals). Thirdly, we find little or no difference between self-reported life satisfaction between passive speakers, i.e., those who understand Okinawan but do not productively use it, and monolinguals who speak only Japanese. This last finding puts the idea of ‘language as a resource’ (see, e.g., Ruiz

1984) into question. At least passive bilingualism cannot be exploited or applied as a resource in ways that lead to higher life satisfaction. While it is too early to conclude what this signifies in detail, it seems language matters only for the well-being of Yomitan Village when individuals can engage both as listeners and speakers in Okinawan. Only speaking Okinawan, that is, only full participation via Okinawan correlates with higher degrees of life satisfaction. This does not mean that language and well-being are a zero-sum game, though. One can speak both Japanese and Ryukyuan, and there is, as a matter of fact, no single informant who reported speaking only Okinawan. However, productive and passive knowledge of both languages is needed for higher life satisfaction. I would argue that these three insights that we can derive from the data in Table 4 provide us with better insights into the functionality and benefits of multilingualism in Japan.

Conclusion and outlook

What this paper should achieve is to provide some arguments to encourage new sociolinguistic research projects with new epistemologies and new research methods for Japan. In late modern, urbanizing, and internationalizing Japanese society, approaches along the lines of a sociolinguistics of distribution are often no longer adequate for the sociolinguistic phenomena we have at hand. New epistemologies such as the sociolinguistics of mobile resources and new interdisciplinary projects linking the material and the immaterial world, language and social space, or language and well-being can be fruitfully explored. Secondly, the utilitarian idea of language as a resource also appears limited. Rather than seeing language as something that can be accumulated and exchanged for something else – social mobility, for example, but also well-being – language emerges in our example from Yomitan Village as something that develops its full potential only when it is employed reciprocally, and when individuals fully participate in a lingua-culture. These are, I believe, no trivial findings.

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