

Editorial

Ryukyuan Perspectives for Language Reclamation

Patrick Heinrich 

Department of Asian and North African Studies, Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Dorsoduro, 3246, 30123 Venezia, Italy; patrick.heinrich@unive.it

1. Introduction

If languages are naturally transmitted in a stable self-regulatory society (Fishman 1991, p. 355), then we can say that such a society has not existed in the Ryukyu Islands for many generations. Domination from outside—by the Japanese mainland and the US—has destabilized Ryukyuan society for more than a century and, as an effect thereof, Ryukyuan languages have become endangered. Endangered languages can be reinvigorated, revitalized, and reclaimed, but this requires addressing the social, cultural, and linguistic causes of societal destabilization. Endangered language communities need to re-stabilize and re-regulate society anew.

A new wave of action in support of Ryukyuan languages is today carried out by a new generation of researchers to this end. Ryukyuan languages are a crucial part of their identity and everyday linguistic life. They devote much energy and time to learning and expanding linguistic skills, as well as to sharing these newfound skills with others. This new generation embodies hands-on attitudes and is actively involved in local language reclamation. They develop new epistemologies and employ new vocabulary. For example, ‘language reclamation’ is now preferred to ‘language revitalization’. There is an important difference between the two. Reclamation is focused on the effects of learning one’s heritage language. It denotes a process of appropriation and individual engagement and change, while revitalization focuses on possible strategies and policies to reverse language shift (Topping 2023). The former is concerned with language, the latter with (new) speakers. It is not coincidental, therefore, that most of the new generation of scholars are new speakers of Ryukyuan languages, and that they are engaged in transforming their lives and those of others with whom they collaborate. They are inspired by issues of identity, they are more deeply rooted in local communities, and they depart from emic and Indigenous perspectives. This new wave of engagement is more hopeful for the Ryukyuan speakers regarding the future of their identities, communities, and languages.

New speakers of Ryukyuan languages were hard to come by until around 2010. It is, therefore, a noteworthy fact that there are an estimated 100 new speakers of Ryukyuan languages at the time of writing this introduction. O’Rourke et al. (2015, p. 1) define new speakers as “individuals with little or no home or community exposure to a minority language but who instead acquire it through immersion or bilingual educational programs, revitalization projects or as adult language learners.” In the absence of bilingual education programs, new speakers in the Ryukyus reclaim their heritage languages in informal contexts (Hammime 2019, 2020; Zlazli 2021). Ryukyuan reclamation often bears strong traces of untutored language acquisition. Therefore, it requires collaborations with and extensions of one’s networks (Fujita-Round 2023). These actions restore, albeit on a small scale, the self-regulation and stability of Ryukyuan society that is necessary to maintain the Indigenous languages of the Ryukyus.

New speakers of Ryukyuan languages change the sociolinguistic situation in important ways. They demonstrate that one can learn a language, identify with it, and put it at the center of one’s life, even if it was not naturally transmitted in the family or learned at school. New speakers challenge the formerly stable situation of language shift, loss, and decline.



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The presence of new speakers lifts intergenerational language loss out of its historical trajectories. It throws historical developments into the present. Ryukyuan language proficiency, for example, can no longer be simply predicted by the age of a speaker, nor can such proficiency be expected to be fixed in time (Arakaki 2023). The above processes result in new perspectives on Ryukyuan language learning and reclamation. Decolonization is one of its most salient and important features.

2. Decolonizing Ryukyuan Languages and Language Studies

Recent changes in action towards Ryukyuan languages and the arrival of new speakers notwithstanding, the oppressive past and its legacies remain present in contemporary Ryukyuan society. Stuck between a past that refuses to fade away and a future that does not easily materialize, language reclamation takes place in a third space, where established binaries of past/present, us/them, teacher/learner, speaker/non-speaker are fluid and ambiguous (Topping 2023; Fujita-Round 2023; Ohara and Machida 2023). This is evident in the fact that language reclaimers feel part of a language community from the onset of their reclamation activities. They feel that they belong to a speech community even before they learn to speak the language. Additionally, the outcome of language reclamation is not binary in the sense that ‘who I was before’ versus ‘who I am now’ or ‘me as a non-speaker’ versus ‘me as a speaker’ is clearly defined. There also is no ‘reversal’ of language shift and language loss in the strict sense of the word. There is no direct way back to a past of non-domination and cultural loss. Having to learn one’s heritage language as an adult is a constant reminder of the past (having grown up monolingually) and its legacy (a nagging sense of linguistic insecurity). It is humbling, and at times humiliating, to have to strive for and engage in something as obvious as wanting to speak one’s own language. This makes the reclamation process often emotionally draining.

Propelled outside the old trajectory of language shift and loss, and in view of the linguistic, social, and emotional difficulties that language reclamation brings about, learning and speaking a Ryukyuan language needs to make sense. Such sense is not out there, ready to be employed for language reclamation purposes. Rather, a new meaning needs to be created. Making sense of being Ryukyuan is what language reclamation really is about. These new meanings must render the non-binary hybrid outcomes of conflicting identities and language uses valid and relevant (Arakaki 2023). Thereby, the past serves as an ideological and practical contrast against which the current reclamation activities are set (Hammine and Billins 2022). Postcolonial approaches offer us an epistemological template for how we can capture these desires, activities, and outcomes. Bhabha’s (1994, p. 3) discussion of ‘difference’ in postcolonial settings neatly summarizes also the present sociolinguistic situation in the Ryukyus: “Discursive representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition. The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, ongoing negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation.”. Additionally, in the Ryukyus, linguistic differences and identities are not ontologically given. They require articulation that gives meaning to the outcome of difference at a time of sociocultural change. Issues touching on Ryukyuan languages and identities take place in spaces that are both emerging and ambivalent. Language reclaimers are not simply located ‘in-between’ a past when Ryukyuan languages were widely spoken across all generations and the present monolingual imagination of Japan. It is this specific location, a postcolonial third space, that allows language activists and new speakers to elaborate on new forms and strategies of selfhood and language.

Language has always played a key role in efforts to distance oneself from an unbecoming past and to project new visions into the future in a position of in-betweenness (Thiong’o; 1986, p. 28). It is important to acknowledge, thereby, that Ryukyuan society was not simply dominated by outsiders. Domination was recreated also from within. Ryukyuan society was taught and learned to perceive themselves, their language, culture, habits, and values, negatively (Guay 2023). There is no clear dichotomy between oppressors and oppressed.

The present new generation of scholars and activists are keenly aware that language endangerment always takes place in dominated communities, that these communities have accepted large parts of the oppressive ideology, and that they have been involved in its reproduction (Heinrich 2013). Dominance has also shaped past research approaches and practices (Hammine and Billins 2022). Ryukyuan language reclamation requires the decolonization of its research traditions and practices. It is no longer simply about ‘let’s pay attention to community language’ (*shimakutuba o daiji ni suru*). Ryukyuan society and its relationship with the majority of the Japanese society need to change fundamentally, and more radical transformations are underway.

Consider two vignettes that exemplify this. New speaker, language activist, and scholar Miho Zlazli told me in an interview on 9 March 2021: “The fact that our languages are endangered signals that some marginalization is going on. We want to resolve this problem. We want autonomy. We want to live our life just as the Japanese people or the English people do. We want to enjoy our own life like them.” Professor Masahide Ishihara from the University of the Ryukyus told me in an interview on 8 March 2021 something similar, and he, thereby, named the elephant in the room, decolonization. “The motivation to learn a Ryukyuan language comes from the inside, from a desire of wanting to change. We have been looked down upon. But one can change this and rise by learning and speaking a Ryukyuan language. One can bring about the change that one desires. In that way, one can make a big contribution. By restoring one’s language, one can also restore self-esteem. One can combat Okinawan’s dependency on the mainland in this way. One strengthens a spirit of independence (*dokuritsushin*). In other words, one engages in decolonization.” Decolonization is about the rediscovery, reclamation, and reappropriation of an endangered language to combat a range of sociocultural and political problems. Language learning provides opportunities, in a third space, to rethink the past and to project a future that breaks the long process of linguistic and cultural damage and destruction.

Decolonization must not repeat the mistakes of colonization. It can avoid the imposition of monotonous and monolithic sets of values, cultures, aesthetics, and practices. It can avoid essentialism. Decolonization does not have to impose Okinawan above all other Ryukyuan languages, the Shuri variety over all other local varieties in Okinawa, the Hirara variety above all other varieties in Miyakoan, etc. Everybody writing in this Special Issue is keenly aware of such pitfalls (e.g., Van der Lubbe 2023). Postmodern individuals, such as new speakers of an endangered language, can deal with ambiguity where languages are no longer tied to issues of right or wrong, good or bad, etc.

3. Language Reclamation for Well-Being

Put simply, decolonization is a practice that seeks to undo the effects of colonization. Given the enormity of this endeavor, Appleton (2019) proposes to focus on smaller steps. These include hiring Indigenous faculty members, challenging practices within one’s field of study (becoming ‘anti-disciplinary’), developing new curricula and syllabi, or creating new physical, social, and intellectual spaces that are emotionally safe for everyone who wants to engage in decolonization. Many of these activities are evolving in the Ryukyus today (Topping 2023; Ohara and Machida 2023).

The current wave in Ryukyuan language research and activism does not only differ in orientation and action. We also see a principal difference in determination and motivation. The modern sociolinguistic history of the Ryukyus has been commonly divided into four stages (Hokama 1971, pp. 52–62). These stages are the ‘Tokyo language period’ (*Tōkyō no kotoba*) of the first 30 years of the Meiji period (1868–1912), the ‘common language period’ (*futsūgo*) that lasted until the mid-1930s, the standard language period (*hyōjungo*) that followed until the mid-1950s, and a period of more relaxed attitudes towards standard language use and spread (*kyōtsūgo*). Note that this periodization is entirely based on attitudes towards and events concerning the spread of Japanese in the Ryukyus. The year 2000, with the establishment of the Society for Okinawan Language Revitalization (*Uchinaaguchi fukyū kyōgikai*), constitutes a sea change in the sociolinguistic history of the

archipelago (Hara and Heinrich 2015). It was reinforced by the publication of the UNESCO Atlas a decade later. In this fifth stage of modern Ryukyuan language history, Ryukyuan languages are now the main concern. Today, the future of Ryukyuan languages is at stake, and with that the possibility of a Ryukyuan society without its heritage languages. Ryukyuan languages are now increasingly often perceived as a resource for living dignified, fulfilled, and meaningful lives. This is in line with the recent attention to the role of endangered language for individual and societal well-being (Walsh 2018; Zuckermann 2020).

Language reclamation in the contemporary Ryukyus departs from a keen awareness that language loss is bigger than language itself. Activists know that losing a language entails the loss of an entire world of symbolic representations, and therefore, of how to place oneself in the world. Concepts of self, society, and place change when one language is replaced by another (Guay 2023). Language loss is no trivial loss.

Language loss and the sociocultural displacement accompanying it are responsible for many problems in endangered speech communities worldwide, including those in Japan. Endangered language communities like the Ryukyans and the Ainu are more likely than the majority Japanese to suffer from prejudice, poverty, spiritual disconnectedness from their heritage culture, family instability, or difficulties to climb the social ladder (see Onai 2011). Language loss also causes a weakening of cultural autonomy. It becomes more difficult to support the community's self-image if majority languages are adopted (Heinrich and Ishihara 2018). Language reclamation addresses these problems and in so doing contributes to well-being (Marmion et al. 2014). Ryukyuan languages provide distinct access to knowledge, practices, and identities. Language activists seek to reclaim all of this, not only language. Their ultimate purpose, one could say, is to strengthen individual and societal well-being. When it comes to endangered languages, language learning is about many more things than the acquisition of a new language system. Ryukyuan language learners report various difficulties and setbacks when learning, rediscovering, and reclaiming their heritage languages, but they also report the joy that this involves. Consider just two such voices. When asked what learning Okinawan does to him, Kōta Tamayose, a new speaker of Okinawan, stated the following (interview 26 March 2021): "The history we learn in school is Japanese history, but we are different from the Japanese. We are people with our own history, and I am one of these people. The culture, too, is different. We have our own culture. When I first thought about it, it made me happy." When asked what the Okinawan language meant to her, Seira Machida (interview 26 March 2021) stated that "speaking or listening to Okinawan for me is like healing myself with medicine." We can see in these two vignettes that language learning and reclamation in the Ryukyus evolve from the bottom up. It is a deeply personal experience of liberation.

The issues outlined above are for the first time comprehensively and purposefully explored in a collection of papers. Seven articles report on Ryukyuan perspectives on language education in this Special Issue. Van der Lubbe (2023) counters the ideological argument that variation within a language constitutes a problem for language reclamation. He argues that reclamation cannot repeat the practice of raising one variety above the others. All varieties must be valued, and can be valued, in the reclamation process. In his article, he lays out the principal parameters of variation between Ryukyuan languages to demonstrate how these can also be taught in language reclamation classes. His discussion underlines the necessity to not depart from mainstream and non-endangered language teaching ideologies and practices.

Guay (2023) offers a discussion about how languages provide different ways of looking at and placing oneself in the world. Local terminology about orientation in space and seasons in Yaeyaman is part of a non-dominant conceptualization of the world. These terms link Yaeyaman speakers closer and more intimately to the immediate local ecology and geography. Rather than (unfavorably) comparing Yaeyaman terminology to the dominant conceptualization shared between modernized languages like Japanese or English, Guay argues that Yaeyaman terminology is an asset to take pride in. It offers a unique

perspective on the local world. Difference matters, and acknowledging difference is part of the decolonization of the mind.

[Hammine and Billins \(2022\)](#) discuss how research on endangered languages cannot follow practices and procedures established for non-endangered languages. They argue that mainstream linguistics are politically charged and require reformation. In new collaborative approaches between researchers and community members, agents and objects of research are merged. This puts all kinds of relations in question: agendas, philosophies, authorities, priorities, communities, etc. Such ontological and epistemological shifts are a hallmark of decolonization processes. Decolonization shifts views and practices in a new direction. The aim of the research is no longer simply that of knowing but of restoring justice, maintaining diversity, and enhancing community well-being.

[Ohara and Machida \(2023\)](#) present a pioneering discussion of how language documentation can be used for language reclamation. In modernist epistemology, folklore is usually seen as a relic of the past, to be read at selected occasions and places only (school, festivals, speech events, etc.). However, when taking a decolonial approach, folklore can be reinstated as a source of knowledge that is relevant for a richer and more nuanced perspective on a given community and its cultural heritage. Ohara and Machida show how folklore tales can counter the colonizing tropes and reinstate the communities, their stories, heroes, myths, humor, localities, etc., as a cultural center of their own.

[Fujita-Round's \(2023\)](#) contribution focuses on pedagogy. She stresses the particularities of endangered language reclamation; an activity where linguistic skills and resources exist (only) in the immediate community and in the family. Issues of expertise and authority are, thus, different from those of other topics discussed at school. Language reclamation pedagogy requires creativity and a redefinition of (in)formality, roles, processes, and learning objectives. Fujita-Round's educative project shifts agency to pupils by tasking them to explore their home community by creating videos. These activities contribute to decolonizing language ideologies, attitudes, and uses. It allows children to creatively discover local perspectives, expressions, and expertise that has otherwise no place in the national school curriculum.

[Arakaki's \(2023\)](#) work is an ethnographic account of ongoing language adaption processes of the honorific style in the family. She discusses how actual language reclamation is fraught with difficulties. The return of Okinawan in the family that she describes involves ambiguities and insecurities that slowly give way to new interactively constructed routines. Shifting from Japanese to Okinawan in the home domain results in family roles that differ from those of the Okinawan native-speaker generation. New speakers of Okinawan enter a third space in the family domain.

[Topping \(2023\)](#) discusses grassroots efforts to reclaim Yaeyaman varieties. The master-apprentice initiatives in which he participates restore discourses between generations with different linguistic and cultural socialization. Thereby, various types of knowledge are transferred, rediscovered, reevaluated, and altered. The participatory action research conducted by Topping shows the transformative socio-cultural character of Ryukyuan language reclamation. Reclamation is never unidirectionally from old to young, fluent to less fluent, insider to outsider, etc. Rather, these activities open a space where two or more trajectories intersect and dialectically constitute new fields of experience.

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