

Okinawans must use their languages or risk losing their identity

FOREIGN AGENDA

Patrick Heinrich

Know some "Okinawan dialect"? Did you hear it on the popular NHK drama "Churasan," perhaps? Well, actually, what you get to hear on TV or from younger Okinawans is not a dialect of Okinawan at all but a type of Japanese — namely, Okinawan Japanese.

In fact, Okinawan proper is a language distinct both from Japanese and the other five Ryukyuan languages: Amami, Kunigami, Miyako, Yaeyama and Yonaguni. Since Japanese has replaced these languages in almost all contexts in daily life, all six languages are highly endangered today. Only older people speak them, and they speak them rarely.

The six Ryukyuan tongues are therefore listed in the "UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing" compiled by the U.N.'s culture and educational agency. UNESCO supports language revitalization because languages constitute intangible heritage culture. In Okinawa's case, according to UNESCO, all Ryukyuan languages and the cultures expressed through these languages are on course for extinction by 2050.

Japanese was officially introduced in Okinawa in 1880. Prior to that, it had only been used for writing and diplomacy by the court of the independent Ryukyuu Kingdom. The first Protestant missionary in Okinawa, Bernard Jean Bettelheim, was unaware that Okinawan was a language distinct from Japanese. While staying in Okinawa between 1846 and 1854, Bettelheim penned a grammar guide to the language he heard around him, only to later find out that it was not Japanese after all. He had studied the "wrong" language and hence had to rename his grammar guide after Japan was opened to the outside world and Bettelheim was exposed to Japanese.

The Ryukyuan languages comprise 750 local dialects, so you had better forget all ideas about the so-called Okinawan dialect, or Okinawa-ben — they are wildly off the mark. All 750 dialects are mutually unintelligible with Japanese. This is not surprising given the fact that Japanese and the Ryukyuan languages separated before the sixth century.

Consider an example of their distinctiveness. If you wanted to say in Japanese, "That person may be home now," you would say something like, "Ano hito ima uchi ni iru daro." On Yonaguni

Island, however, people would say something like, "Khanu tuu ja nai da ni waruka bagaranun." This is actually no longer a variant of Japanese (just try making sense of it with a Japanese grammar guide and dictionary!); this is an utterance in another language.

Still, both Yonaguni and Japanese can be said to belong to the same language family, Japonic. The relationship between them is similar to that between languages of the Slavic, Romance or Germanic families. The variance between the Ryukyuan languages and Japanese, by the way, may be best compared to that between English and German.

Since this is not the Bilingual page but the Community section, let's talk about how communities in Okinawa Prefecture and the Amami Islands of Kagoshima are affected by the endangerment of their cultural-heritage languages. Put simply, communities are bound by the borders of their languages because communication is required for sharing the same set of values, ideas, stories, humor, proverbs, collective memories and other experiences that give rise to identities. In other words, distinct languages give rise to distinct identities.

One of my native languages, for example, is German, and I feel German now and then (like during the World Cup!), but I've never felt Danish or Dutch or any other sort of "West-Germanian." I simply don't know what it's like to "be Dutch" or "be Danish," and that has much to do with the fact that I speak neither Dutch nor Danish.

In a similar vein, if you don't speak a Ryukyuan language, you will not know what it's like to be part of a Ryukyuan language-speaking community. Hence, with the ongoing disappearance of the Ryukyuan languages, an identity is vanishing as well. When I interviewed language revitalization activist Shinako Oyakawa last year, she stressed that "It's not only about language — it's about the way we want to live."

Let's go back to the beginning: Japanese began to be spread in the Ryukyuu islands during the process of being absorbed into the Meiji Japanese state between 1872 and 1879. The Ryukyuan court had been forcibly dissolved and the last king, Sho Tai, exiled to Tokyo. Japanese was spread in the islands not only for purposes of communication between Ryukyuan and mainland Japanese, but also with the aim of making Ryukyuan "Japanese."

This process — called nation building — was taking place across the modern

Making up for lost time: Okinawa International University students prepare for a Ryukyuan dance and music performance. With the last speakers of the Ryukyuan languages dying out, an identity is vanishing too.

PATRICK HEINRICH



world around this time. Nation building is the imagination of a community that was nonexistent before, and it has always coincided with the spread of one dominant language at the expense of others — French in France, Italian in Italy, Japanese in Japan (incidentally, the names of these languages were invented at the same time). In the case of Japan, non-Japanese-speaking peoples of the Japanese nation at the time included the Ainu and Ryukyuan, as well as the Ogasawara and Hachijo islanders.

From the late 19th century, all other

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languages of Japan were actively suppressed, stigmatized and banned from specific contexts (school, the bureaucracy, writing, the media, etc.) in order to stifle any kind of identity that might challenge the idea of "being Japanese." As a result, Japan's indigenous minority languages all became endangered.

Language endangerment happens all over the world, not only in Japan. According to UNESCO, for example, 13 languages are endangered in Germany, 26 in France, 11 in the U.K. and eight in Japan (Ainu, Hachijo and six Ryukyuan languages).

This brings us — finally — to the topic of this column: language revitalization.

Some people might at first think that the loss of endangered languages is no big deal. They may even see it as constituting some sort of "progress." Upon reflection, however, they might note that it is always weaker, dominated communities that experience language endangerment: Ryukyuan and Ainu in Japan, the Scots and the Welsh in Britain, the Bretons and Gallo in France, the Friulians and Sicilians in Italy, the Sorbs and the Frisians in Germany, and so on.

Experts on endangered languages are all in agreement that language endangerment is a sign of domination of a majority over a minority. Today, endangered languages can often serve to adjust such a relationship between majority and minority. Language revitalization is never attempted for the sake of language alone: Language is used to bring value to the community.

It is not surprising, then, that endangered languages are being revitalized around the world, from Welsh and Breton to Sicilian and Sorbian. These languages have all been put to new uses in an attempt to safeguard them and bring new value to these communities.

Consider the example of the Ryukyuan languages. During its annual

symposium in March, the Ryukyuan Heritage Language Society identified the following 12 benefits of revitalizing the Ryukyuan languages.

Language revitalization would: 1) transmit and promote a deeper reflection of the Ryukyus in Ryukyuan languages; 2) restore Ryukyuan self-esteem and confidence; 3) promote Ryukyuan perspectives on language, history and culture in education; 4) restore cohesion between the generations, present and past; 5) familiarize the younger generations with Ryukyuan heritage culture; 6) maintain, strengthen and apply Ryukyuan cultural heritage; 7) contemporize Ryukyuan language and make it relevant for the future; 8) regain control over Ryukyuan self-image and education; 9) maintain

choices in language, identity and culture; 10) stop the adaptation of Ryukyuan identities and behaviors toward those of the Japanese mainland; 11) contribute to communal happiness and welfare; 12) recognize Japan's cultural diversity and promote intercultural tolerance.

Note that, despite their level of endangerment and their much smaller size in comparison to Japanese, only Ryukyuan languages can bring these benefits to local Ryukyuan communities.

The link between language revitalization and the gains it brings to communities is an important one for local communities and for the scholars studying them. "Indigenous Languages — Value to the Community" is the topic of an international symposium jointly organized by the Foundation for Endangered Languages and the Ryukyuan Heritage Language Society in Okinawa from Sept. 17 to 20 in Ginowan, southern Okinawa. More than 40 participants from around the world will meet there to discuss how endangered languages can bring new benefits to the communities speaking them. More information on this symposium can be found at www.ryukyuan.org and www.ogmios.org.

Readers interested in the topic but unable to travel to Okinawa in September might consider attending a symposium organized by Linguapax Asia on Sept. 13 at Tokyo's Gakushuin University on the topic of "Endangered Languages Networking — Values and Benefits for the Future" (see www.linguapax-asia.org).

The similarity of the topics is no coincidence: Language really matters for communities and is vital to their wellbeing.

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Some online comments in response to William Bradbury's Aug. 5 Foreign Agenda column, titled "After the romance of expat life fades, the dream lives on":

"It becomes hard to tell if it's the world that's changed or the viewfinder through which I see it. I go back to the same bars in Shibuya that I went to years ago and see all the same faces. The wild and wacky bartender now seems like a faded actor as he keeps up the same shtick night after night.

"I see a younger version of myself in the fresh-faced young travelers and feel a sense of guilt over what exactly I'm doing here. Tokyo, a city once so full of endless possibilities and connections, seems so isolating and restrictive after a few years."

Good grief. After reading that passage I was under the assumption you were turning 40 and having a midlife crisis, not in your mid 20s. There's no such thing as going sideways when you're that young. It's all education and experience.

The best advice I ever got was to set aside all my worries about the future until at least age 30. Your 20s are for exploring yourself and the world around you. Take a trip back to that watering hole in Shibuya when you're 45 and then see how much has changed!

MARK GARRETT

I get two major impressions out of this. One or both might be completely off-base, but I figured it's worth putting them down, just in case.

First: I get the impression you're isolated (more than normal in Tokyo) due to hanging out mostly at *gaijin* [foreigner] haunts and/or due to a lack of language skills. If that's the case, the latter is harder to fix, but the former can be easily solved, in addition

to resulting in fun, challenging interactions that might revive the experience for you, assuming that's what you want.

Second: You're in Tokyo. Yeah, it's a concrete jungle, and while there's a lot to do it definitely leaves a lot to be desired... but that's not all there is to Japan! Unless you are solely interested in Tokyo (and there's nothing wrong with that), perhaps spending an extended period of time in another part of Japan could similarly rejuvenate your enthusiasm for Japan. Osaka is still pretty big and fairly different, and then there are places like Fukuoka or Kumamoto that are reasonably sized but definitely different in tone and pace.

It really depends on what you want. If you went to Tokyo to be in a different place but hold on to the safety net of like-minded, English-speaking people, then perhaps that's run its course and it's time to find something else. But if you still want to experience Japan and Tokyo has worn out its welcome with you, maybe it'd be worth looking for a different place to try before you leave.

PHU

Strange, how the ones complaining and having these problems are those who got all the opportunities at their hands.

Sorry, but as a person who lost all of his opportunities to learn and to progress as a young person should be able to, just because of those nasty money issues, like losing the family home, having no jobs available for years, having to support my struggling family, somehow I can't muster sympathy for the writer of the article.

I would be doing many, many things (killing and such things are the only things I would not do) to be able to get to Japan, and get just one chance to meet just one of the people I admire there.

I aspire to write; I can't help loving the style and genre elements of modern Japanese storytelling. I want to be able to study Japanese, and my dream would be to write novels, or be a partner of a manga-ka [artist] and write stories, create universes for him/her, but sadly I have to work most of my time just to keep on surviving and supporting those who I love. And I still miss some hours of

my sleep to fabricate some of my stories, to keep on writing, to try to get some languages on me, and to try to figure out what to do about the university I had to leave, because if I have no papers, I will have about zero chances to get anywhere in life.

KHAOS CUALDAWATH

The commenters (so far) are missing the point, but that's no surprise. There is a difference between experiential growth and personal growth. Most of the commenters are assuming that the author lives in a bubble and has no contact outside of a limited range of people and places.

That is not what this is all about. It's about the sense that life in Japan feels like a dream — an avoidance of the real world and the potential for personal growth that comes along with it. Those who are objectifying life and seeing it as a series of people and places to be encountered (which largely includes those who have never actually spent a very long time abroad) aren't going to understand this.

Life in Japan offers certain challenges, but it also creates a situation for foreigners in particular in which they are outside of the culture. You will never be integrated. You will never be regarded as an insider. You will always be placed in a special box and no matter how hard you try to get out of it, the natives will stuff you back into it.

It is not an act of cruelty, but simply a reflection of the mentality the Japanese possess based on their geography, history, education, and current mentality. Being in that box is often a comfortable place as Japanese people can be so kind and polite, but it also means there are certain personal growth challenges that come from living in a world in which you are the equivalent of a kindly treated puppy that people look after and speak to in a particular fashion. It's a nice place to live — truly, nice — but it's also limiting.

The author is coming to terms with something few people are ever aware of while living in Japan because they subscribe to the fantasy that the author encounters when he talks to people back home. It makes them feel like their

lives are more fulfilling, more exciting and more interesting than they really are and it allows them to stay nestled in their padded box and avoid the reality of dealing with people who don't want to help them, have no interest in being friends with them based on their perceived "exotic" nature, or being in an environment in which they have to compete for jobs on their own merits rather than on their novelty value.

If you've ever noticed how many mundane and untalented foreigners manage to get on Japanese TV for nothing more than making fools of themselves, then you're seeing the fact that one can be a big fish in a small pond merely by being foreign. That's just one reflection of the limits the author is experiencing in terms of personal growth: The bar is often so low that it's trivial to hop over it. Most people aren't going to understand that, because they're too busy convincing themselves that the trappings of success are equivalent to psychological growth.

ORCHID64

So much of what Orchid64 says here is off-base, I don't even know where to start.

I spent five years in Japan. Not that long, but relationships were built with local people that will last a lifetime. No, I'm not delusional. As time went by, most people I encountered, whether they be parents of my students or the guy at the local *izakaya* [pub/restaurant], acted little different with me than they did with anyone else. They opened up, and so did I.

Don't believe me? That's your prerogative. But I'll never buy the "impossible to integrate" schtick. That's loser talk.

SCOTTYP

There is some truth in that people can overstay their time in Japan without learning much and just treading water. But I think you can travel thousands of miles and still stay stuck where you are. Because expats tend to stay in Japan for a short time, there is a strange sense of being left behind if you're here for the long term. *Sumebamiyako* [wherever I lay my hat, that's

You're up next: William Bradbury's recent article on his expat blues inspired Japan Times columnist Jake Adelstein to respond through the medium of song.

HIDEO ISHIDA



my home] becomes true after a while. "Well, I'm sure that I could be an AV star / If I could get out of this place."

Now Hiro is a real estate manga-ka / Who never had time for a wife / And he's talking with Moroni who's still at Sony / And probably will be for life.

And the hostess is practicing pouring green tea / As the businessmen get drunk real slow / Yes, they're sharing a drink they call loneliness / But it's better than drinking Jinro.

Sing us a song, you're the karaoke man / Sing us a song that's manic / Well we're all in the mood for anything / And at least this isn't Gaspanic.

It's a pretty good crowd for a Thursday / And the manager gives me a nudge / 'Cause he knows that it's me they've been coming to see / To forget about the boss they begrudge.

And the laser disc player sounds like a *matsuri* / And the microphone smells like red wine / As they sip their beer and yell in my ear — / "Can you sing 'You Are My Sunshine'?"

Sing us a song, you're the karaoke man / Sing us a song, you old dude / Well we're all in the mood for 'My Way' / And you've got us feeling so good.

JAKE ADELSTEIN

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