17

MULTILINGUALISM AND WELLBEING IN JAPAN

The Case of Yomitan Village in Okinawa

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17.1 The Situation

With 40,000 inhabitants, Yomitan Village in Okinawa Prefecture is the largest village in Japan. It has purposefully decided to remain a village because this allows for more cultural autonomy. Local culture is dear to the Yomitan community, which is home to a UNESCO World Heritage site (the Zakami castle ruins) and is widely known for its precious handcrafts (Yachimun pottery, Hanaui textiles, and Ryukyuan glassware). The village marks the entry point to the subtropical Yanbaru forest in the northern part of Okinawa Island, and it is also home to the Yomitan variety (*Yuntanza kutuba*) of the Okinawan language (*Uchinaaguchi*). Yomitan is also an invitingly pretty place, featuring many sugarcane and flower fields, beaches, and the scenic Cape Zanpa with its white lighthouse. Directly opposite the village, however, we find the noisy and busy US Kadena Air Base, one of the largest in Asia. It is often said in Okinawa that the Yomitan inhabitants are particularly protective and proud of their ancestral heritage, and it is perhaps the contrast between its rich traditional culture and the occupation of part of its territory by the US military that has shaped such a keen linguistic and cultural awareness in the village. Despite an exceptional commitment to protecting local culture and language, Yomitan's ancestral language is endangered and has been replaced by Japanese in all usage domains. Together with the Education Committee of Yomitan Village, we decided to study whether the active multilingual speakers who have retained their ancestral language report higher rates of subjective wellbeing than those who understand the language but do not actively speak it (passive bilinguals) and those who neither understand nor speak it (monolinguals).[1]

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While 'wellbeing' is a relatively new concept in the sociolinguistic toolbox, sociolinguistics has implicitly often included aspects that could be seen in a larger context of wellbeing. Such sociolinguistic precursors to the study of wellbeing include discussions on language utility, restricted and elaborated code, symbolic power, inequality, domination, justice, linguistic human rights, foreigner and elder speech, etc. In the last decade, wellbeing has slowly started to catch more structured and purposeful attention of sociolinguists. We can think of three reasons for this. First, we witnessed the growth and prominence of happiness studies in the twenty-first century (see Nettle 2005). Second, the shift to situated, fluid, third-wave approaches to individual language life, where social actors apply their specific linguistic resources (e.g., Blommaert & Backus 2023), has led to more fine-grained analysis of how such mobile, truncated, and contextual resources affect their users. While individual repertoires and interactions remain social because they are shaped under the influence of power, we can now see more clearly how linguistic diversity and individual differences can positively and negatively affect them. Third, public health scholars have started to take an interest in language as a possible variable that affects health (see Heinrich 2023). We can capture the effect of language on its users, from empowerment and liberation to domination and stigmatisation, by applying the concept of wellbeing.

Consider two brief examples of how language may affect wellbeing positively or negatively. Concerning *physical wellbeing*, Oster et al. (2014) found a positive correlation between Indigenous language knowledge and good health (reduced rates of diabetes) among First Nations communities in Canada. Concerning *economic wellbeing*, Cooke et al. (2007) found a negative correlation in that Aboriginal and Torres Islanders in Australia had a disparity gap of 0.184 in their Human Development Index as compared to non-Indigenous Australians. The Human Development Index indicates a composite index that calculates the aggregate score of life expectancy, (formal) education, and income.

This chapter explores a possible relationship between language and *subjective wellbeing*, i.e., individual assessments of fulfilment with life and life satisfaction. Before we examine some of the survey results conducted in Yomitan Village in Section 3, let us briefly consider the sociolinguistic composition of Japanese society, together with language policy and sociolinguistic patterns of language choices in Japan.

17.2 Linguistic Diversity, Language Policy, and Multilingual Practices in Japan

There are currently three million immigrants in Japan (Immigration Services Agency 2022), with a total population of 126 million. Japan's small ratio of immigrants (1.6 per cent) is not exceptional in the region. South Korea has an

immigrant share of 2.6 per cent, and the People's Republic of China has 0.1 per cent. These percentages are considerably lower than the medium ratio of immigrants in OECD member states, which is 9.7 per cent (United Nations 2022). The main immigrant nationalities in Japan are Chinese, Vietnamese, South Korean, Filipino, and Brazilian. Migrants mostly settle in and around Japan's major cities, and most are already bilingual upon arriving in Japan. Diversification of the Japanese population is further accelerated through marriages with foreign nationals. These account for four per cent of all marriages today, and many bilingual children are growing up in international families, particularly in large cities.

Japanese nationals are also linguistically diverse and have always been. In the Ryukyu Islands, in the southwest of the Japanese Archipelago, we find six distinct Ryukyuan languages (Heinrich, Miyara & Shimoji 2015). They are genealogically related to but not mutually intelligible with Japanese. 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 Ryukyuan languages. The interruption of natural intergenerational language transmission is the key mechanism behind language endangerment because once families shift from the ancestral language (Ryukyuan varieties) to the dominating language (varieties of Japanese), it will only take three or four generations until the language becomes extinct as a first language (Fishman 1991). In the Ryukyus, language transmission in the family was interrupted under US occupation (1945–1972) when Ryukyuans sought to prove to the US that they were (genuinely) Japanese to end US occupation and reunite with Japan (Heinrich 2015). Today, Japanese is commonly spoken across the Ryukyus.

At the northern end of the Japanese Archipelago, we find Hokkaido, Sakhalin, and the Kurile Islands (the latter two now part of Russia). These islands were colonised by Japan after the Meiji Restoration of 1868 but have been inhabited for centuries by the Ainu. The Ainuic language family is not genealogically related to Japanese. Natural intergenerational language transmission in Ainu was interrupted much earlier than in the Ryukyus. The first generation of Ainu to be schooled in the Japanese school system at the turn of the twentieth century were instructed by their teachers that the Ainu language and culture were inferior to Japanese and, therefore, had to be given up (Teeter & Okazaki 2011). This generation would not pass on Ainu to their children. Ainu has no first-language speakers left, but the number of L2 speakers is growing (Ohara & Okada 2022). We find Hachijo Island and the Ogasawara Islands at the eastern end of the Japanese Archipelago. The sole surviving variety of Eastern Old Japanese, spoken on Hachijo Island, is considered a distinct language today. The endangered Hachijo language is spoken by less than 2,000 speakers today (Iannucci 2019). Further to the West, 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. The original settlers were quickly outnumbered and became Japanese nationals. Ogasawara Creole English is extinct (Long 2007). Last but not least, Japanese Sign Language adds to the linguistic diversity of Japan. The Deaf and hearing impaired are literate in Japanese, making them a significant bilingual community in Japan. They also have their own vernacular communication practices when using Japanese (Nakashima 2025).

In recent years, tourism has added to Japan's linguistic diversity. Japan currently welcomes between 30 and 35 million foreign visitors annually. China, South Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong provide for most tourists. While migrants and autochthonous communities in Japan are expected to speak Japanese publicly, tourists are not (Heinrich 2021).

Language policy in Japan has always aimed for linguistic homogeneity (Heinrich 2025a). Around the turn of the twentieth century, Japanese became conceptualised as a national language (*kokugo*), and a standard variety was developed, codified, and spread. Varieties of all Japonic languages (Japanese, Ryukyuan, Hachijo) were incorporated as dialects under the umbrella term of *kokugo*. In other words, Ryukyu and Hachijo were declared dialects of the national language. The existence of non-Japonic languages (Ainu, Ogasawara Creole English, Japanese Sign Language) was ignored, allowing for imagining Japan as a monolingual nation. The policy of emphasising linguistic homogeneity has contributed to dialect levelling and the endangerment of all autochthonous languages other than Japanese (Heinrich 2012). However, this development is not uniform across Japan. Okinawan, spoken in Yomitan Village, has the highest vitality among Japan's endangered languages. The older generation (born before 1960) speaks Okinawan to various degrees. The middle generation (born between 1960 and 1990) is usually passively bilingual. They understand but do not productively speak Okinawan. The young generation (born after 1990) does not usually speak or understand Okinawan.

Dialects in Japan remain potential objects for discrimination despite new educational policies that seek to promote more acceptance (Everhart 2021), and Japan's autochthonous languages continue declining despite some policy efforts to support them. There has been, for example, an annual celebration of 'Community Language Day' (*shimakutuba no hi*) since 2006 in support of the Ryukyuan languages, and there was the establishment of a National Ainu Museum in 2020 in support of Ainu. Note, however, that the recent language policy initiatives do not promote Ryukyuan or Ainu for use in higher domains, and there are no structured attempts to adapt these languages to the communicative necessities of contemporary society. No policy aims to raise future generations bilingually. There are newsletters in Ainu and Ryukyuan, the languages are partly used in the linguistic landscape (predominantly for

symbolic and decorative functions), and the languages are also used in social media. Elderly people in Okinawa continue to use Ryukyuan at home, while Ainu is used as a second language in settings such as singing or religious and traditional rituals(Heinrich 2025b).

Official language policies in Japan respond slowly to the decline of language diversity, but many bottom-up initiatives support Japan's folk multilingualism. Consider a few examples. In Hokkaido, the *Urespa* project was set up by Sapporo University in 2010. It provides Ainu students with scholarships to reclaim the Ainu language and culture (Ohara & Okada 2022). Based entirely on individual initiatives, we also find a parent-child Ainu study session (Tsagelnik 2022). In support of Ryukyuan languages, we have a privately set up Master-Apprentices initiative where Ryukyuan intergenerational language transmission is restored (Topping 2023). There is no shortage of such grassroots examples, but they all share the common problem that they are not supported by official policies. Furthermore, no control or revision mechanism exists to evaluate whether language planning results in the postulated language policy objectives (Heinrich 2025b). The situation is different regarding English, which is spoken as a foreign language by around ten per cent of the population (Seargeant 2009).

To summarise, encountering multilingual language use is not difficult in contemporary Japan. The linguistic landscape is a trove of such practices (Backhaus 2006). Many large stores employ staff speaking foreign languages such as English, Chinese, and Korean. One can also find multilingual support in municipalities, airports, hotels, and major train stations. Linguistic diversity is more advanced in large cities, which is also true for language proficiencies. English proficiency in Tokyo is higher than in the rest of Japan (Education First 2023). Some major Japanese companies, such as retailer giant Rakuten and casual wear retailer Uniqlo, are shifting from Japanese to English as the main work language. Some of Japan's leading universities, such as Waseda or Keio, now also offer degrees in English. There are also folk or bottom-up multilingual practices in Japan. However, outsiders are less likely to encounter these because they occur in the family or between friends. This more hidden multilingualism is practiced by speakers of autochthonous and allochthonous languages. The severely endangered Ainu is used in closed networks by more than 200 speakers, more than 300,000 speakers use the definitely or critically endangered Ryukyuan languages, approximately the same number of speakers employ Japanese Sign Language, and several hundred speakers use the critically endangered Hachijo language.

17.3 Language and Wellbeing in Yomitan Village

There is no shortage of up-to-date and comprehensive studies on multilingualism in Japan today (e.g., Maher 2022), but combining multilingualism and

wellbeing is an entirely new field. Wellbeing is an umbrella term that covers three different approaches: (i) the study of affect such as joy (happiness); (ii) cognitive judgments about life satisfaction (subjective wellbeing); and (iii) critical assessments about the fulfilment of one's life, i.e., what philosophers call *eudaimonia* ('good spirit') or what is commonly referred outside academic contexts as 'flourishing' (Nettle 2005). All three orientations to the study of wellbeing share that individual assessments about the fulfilment of life can only be subjective and relative. Research into wellbeing by (Western) social psychologists, sociologists, and economists has identified several variables that impact wellbeing. Variables associated with wellbeing typically include health, education, housing, job satisfaction, leisure time, lack of corruption, etc. The applicability of such Western works on non-Western societies is questioned by some scholars, but addressing this problem is beyond the scope of this chapter (for a discussion, see Oishi 2010; Olko et al. 2022). It is only very recently that language has been considered a factor affecting wellbeing (e.g., Wang 2022).

In our survey in Yomitan Village, we studied multilingual practices that we correlated with the results of internationally used instruments to measure life satisfaction. Since Okinawan is endangered, like all Ryukyuan languages, the local language is commonly only spoken by people born before the 1960s. The generation born afterward is usually passively bilingual, and the young generation is typically monolingual Japanese. Our collected data reveals the ongoing shift from local language to Japanese varieties (Standard Japanese and Okinawan-Japanese).

The data underlying Figure 17.1 and all other data discussed henceforth have been collected through a questionnaire survey conducted by a research team based at Ca'Foscari of Venice and the Education Committee of Yomitan Village in May 2022. A total of 1,374 individuals completed the survey.

We can recognise the effects of language shift in the family domain in Figure 17.1. As is typically the case in language shift, it manifests in the decreasing use of the local ancestral language (the Yomitan variety of Okinawans) from grandparents to parents and then to children. This coincides with increased use of the replacing language, in our case, Standard Japanese and Okinawan Japanese, a Ryukyuan substrate variety of Japanese (for details, see Anderson 2015). Siblings and partners from the older generation may use the local language between them, but there is little occasion to do so. The likelihood of a non-speaker being around prevents more use of the local language as language accommodation, resulting in speakers of Ryukyuan shifting to Japanese, which everybody in Yomitan Village speaks. In this sociolinguistic situation, we study whether knowledge of the endangered local language positively affected wellbeing.

In our survey in Yomitan Village, we asked informants two sets of questions about their proficiency in Ryukyuan and Japanese. This data served as the independent variable, while data from three question batteries on wellbeing

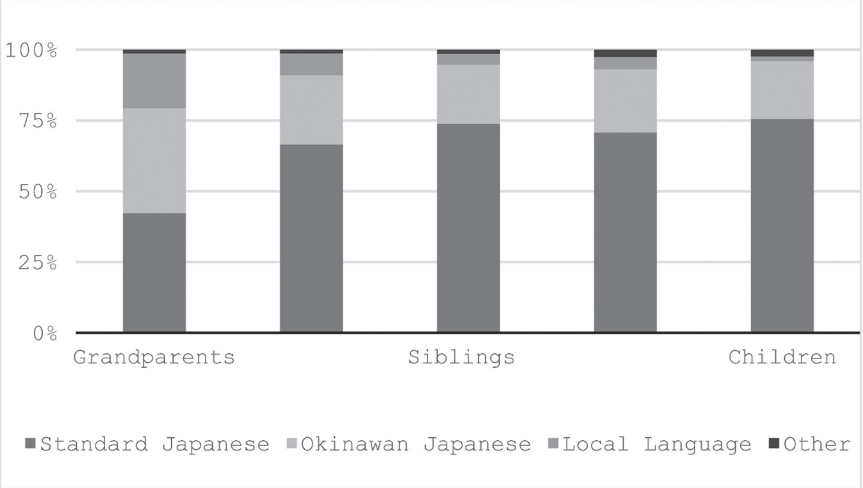

FIGURE 17.1 Language Choices towards Family Members in Yomitan Village

was the dependent variable. We also developed questions for five other variables (decolonisation of the mind, aspiration for social mobility, social capital, identity, language attitudes), which can be used as independent variables to see if they affect wellbeing or as mediating variables that specify in detail how language and wellbeing relate. The following discussion draws only on a small section of our survey, and we report only on the relationship between local language proficiency and the assessment of life satisfaction and language attitudes and life satisfaction.

We first crossed the variables of local language proficiency and life satisfaction. Both batteries of questions provide choice options on a 7-point Likert scale, i.e., the lowest possible score is 1, and the highest is 7. For local language proficiency, participants were asked to assess the validity of the following statements: (1) I speak the local language in everyday conversations; (2) I can understand the local language in everyday conversations; (3) I understand the meaning of local language folk songs; (4) I can use honorific expressions in the local language; (5) I currently also use the local language with family members; (6) I was often exposed to the local language as a child; and (7) I use set phrases of the local language when I speak Japanese.

For life satisfaction, we collected assessments for the following five statements: (1) In most ways, my life is close to my ideal; (2) The conditions of my life are excellent; (3) I am satisfied with my life; (4) So far, I have gotten the important things I wanted in life; and (5) If I would live my life over again, I would change almost nothing. These statements have been taken from the Satisfaction with Life Scales (henceforth, SWLS), a widely-used instrument to measure wellbeing. SWLS is known to show good temporal stability.

TABLE 17.1 Cross-tabulation of Local Language Proficiency and Life Satisfaction.

Local language proficiency	*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*6*	*7*
1.Life is close to my ideal (1–7)	3.78	4.16	4.08	4.28	4.40	4.47	4.67
2.Conditions of life are excellent (1–7)	4.08	4.41	3.64	4.46	4.73	4.80	5.28
3.I am satisfied with my life (1–7)	4.18	4.50	4.39	4.47	4.77	5.05	4.69
4.I have gotten the important things in life (1–7)	4.43	4.52	4.78	4.49	4.91	4.00	4.96
5.I would change almost nothing (1–7)	3.43	3.59	3.43	3.96	4.00	4.40	3.96

Respondents tend not to change their assessments of life satisfaction radically over time when using this instrument.

Table 17.1 shows the cross-tabulation of the Life Satisfaction scores (1–7) and Local Language Proficiency scores (1–7). The data reveals a growing assessment of life satisfaction with increasing language proficiency. If we apply a chi-square test to check the goodness of fit between the independent variables (can speak the local language) and the independent variable (life satisfaction), we obtain a medium p-value of .157, and we cannot exclude the possibility that the corelation between local language proficiency and life satisfaction is random or by chance.

The life satisfaction of those with a local language proficiency score of 7 shows a higher rate of life satisfaction for all five statements of the SWLS compared to those who report a language proficiency with a rate of 1. The biggest difference is the results from the statements 'Life is close to my ideal' and 'Conditions of life are excellent'. There is, however, considerable fluctuation for the proficiencies from 1 to 7 for all five statements of the SWLS battery, and we find no continuous increase in life satisfaction with growing proficiency. In particular, the statement 'So far, I have gotten the important things in life' shows no linear progression.

If we unify the scores of all five statements of the SWLS, calculate their mean, and then relate them to the assessment of life satisfaction (Figure 17.2), the picture of a possible relation between local language proficiency and life satisfaction becomes clearer.

Figure 17.2 shows that the life satisfaction rate drops from informants with a local language proficiency of 6 to those with a proficiency of 7. This could be because the best speakers (those who score 7 in language proficiency) also tend to be the oldest in language endangerment contexts. Higher age may result in possible impediments such as illness, loss of partners and friends, etc., that could affect the evaluation of life satisfaction. Also, being older may result in more intense reflections on life satisfaction. Individuals have a longer life span to look back and less time to look ahead.

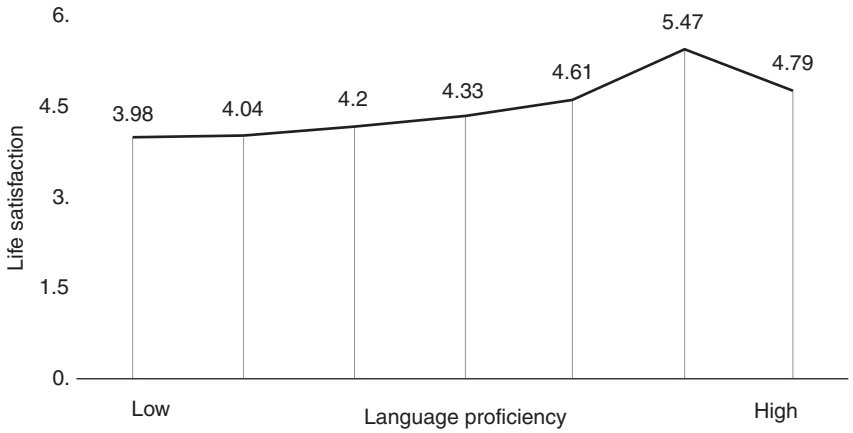

FIGURE 17.2 Correlation between Local Language Proficiency and Assessment of Life Satisfaction

Since we have three generations in Okinawa society, and since these generations usually have distinct language repertoires, we collapsed the 7 categories of local language proficiency into three categories to reflect the main speaker types in Okinawa (active bilinguals, passive bilinguals, monolinguals). We assume that those with a proficiency of 1 to 2 coincide with Japanese monolingual speakers, those with a proficiency of 6 to 7 with full speakers of Okinawan, and 3 to 5 to passive bilinguals. Doing so results in the following satisfaction-with-life scores according to speaker type. Monolingual Japanese: 4.01; Passive Bilingual (Japanese actively, Okinawan passively): 4.48; Active Bilingual (Both Japanese and Okinawan actively): 4.97. That is to say, Passive Bilinguals report 0.47 points (or 6.7 per cent) higher satisfaction with life than the Monolinguals, and Active Bilinguals show an increase of 0.96 points (or 13.7 per cent) compared to the Monolingual Speakers.

Since all Ryukyuan languages had in the past been declared to be dialects of the national language (i.e., Japanese), their existence was thereby hidden and their utility downplayed (Heinrich, Miyara & Shimoji, 2025). Therefore, we examined how much the acknowledgment of linguistic diversity in Japan relates to life satisfaction. In the following, we cross the results on the assessment of 'Japan's strength lies in its homogenous nation, culture, and language' (1–7 on a Likert scale) from the battery of questions on language attitudes with the five assessments of the SWLS (also 1–7). The assessments on 'Japan's strength lies in its homogenous nation, culture, and language' were coded in reverse, i.e., 'strongly agree' is coded with 1 as it most strongly denies the existence of diversity. At the same time, 'strongly disagree' at the other end of the spectrum is coded with 7.

TABLE 17.2 Cross-tabulation of Acknowledging Diversity in Japanese Society with Assessment of Life Satisfaction.

Acknowledgment of diversity (1–7)	*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*6*	*7*
1. Life is close to my ideal (1–7)	3.54	3.70	3.80	3.98	4.43	4.27	4.20
2. Conditions of life are excellent (1–7)	3.20	3.47	3.59	3.72	4.16	3.57	3.84
3. I am satisfied with my life (1–7)	3.18	3.27	3.48	3.59	4.11	3.76	3.86
4. I have gotten the important things in life (1–7)	2.69	3.17	3.36	3.51	3.88	3.89	3.80
5. I would change almost nothing (1–7)	3.83	4.02	4.17	4.37	4.66	5.03	4.52

We obtain a p-value of <.096 for all five questions by applying a chi-square test. Therefore, we cannot exclude the possibility that the correlation between the acknowledgment of diversity and life satisfaction is random or by chance. We find an increase in life satisfaction with an increasing acknowledgment of diversity in Japan. This increase is not linear, and it tends to tip off with those who 'disagree' (6) or 'strongly disagree' (7) with the view that Japan is a culturally and linguistically homogenous country, i.e., with those who most strongly emphasise Japan's diversity. If we unify the data of all five items of the SWLS and relate the scores to which informants acknowledge linguistic diversity in Japan, we obtain a clearer picture. We can see a rise in life satisfaction until those who 'somewhat disagree' (4), which then slowly decreases.

With the data in this brief discussion of language and wellbeing in Yomitan Village, we can find correlations between 'local language proficiency and life satisfaction' (Table 17.1 and Figure 17.2) and between the 'acknowledgment of diversity and life satisfaction' (Table 17.2 and Figure 17.3). Such findings point to the need to investigate the interrelations between language and wellbeing in more detail, as such an approach may reveal important functions of linguistic diversity (and its acknowledgment) for individuals and the local community.

17.4 Outlook and Conclusions

Like most countries worldwide, multilingualism in Japan stems from autochthonous communities, immigrant communities, and tourism. This notwithstanding, Japan is comparatively homogenous, and both autochthonous and immigrant communities are expected to linguistically blend in with the majority population. These expectations are reinforced by and promoted through language policy. As a result, Japanese and English as the main international languages enjoy much prestige, and their utility for education,

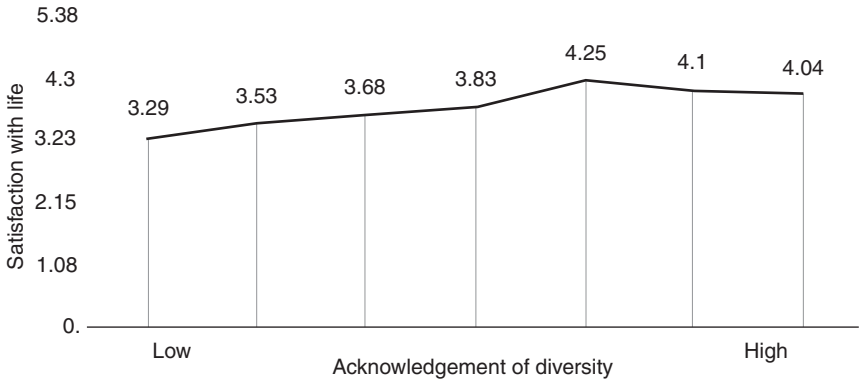

FIGURE 17.3 Correlation between Acknowledging Diversity in Japanese Society with Assessment of Life Satisfaction

employment, and social mobility is high. The prestige and utility of Japan's other languages are more covert. Linguistic diversity is exploited for aesthetic and ludic functions in diverse fields, such as advertisement or popular culture, and also by the majority population (Maher, 2005). However, aesthetic and ludic functions may be too little to support Japan's other languages. For the moment, Japan's linguistic minorities continue to shift to Japanese. This shift is in line with language policies that seek to address diversity through the imposition of linguistic homogeneity.

This chapter suggests that moving away from such an epistemological position favouring monolingualism and linguistic homogeneity toward acknowledging and supporting multilingualism could be an option. We have mentioned two principal reasons for this. First, such a policy would connect with and support the grassroots efforts underway across Japan. Second, the brief excerpt of data that we discussed for the case of Yomitan Village in Okinawa shows that linguistic diversity and multilingualism provide for increased wellbeing of their speakers. Many other arguments support a shift towards embracing and supporting folk multilingualism in Japan. Folk multilingualism is often learned and practiced at home, involving languages that are often not seen as prestigious or enjoying little utility. The benefits of supporting and practicing folk multilingualism range from issues such as fairness and justice, equality in education, equal life choices, choices of identity, the maintenance of local knowledge and cultural practices, or political empowerment of minority members in Japanese society. Studying language and wellbeing can add more arguments to these discourses. It can provide an important approach to reveal the benefits of maintaining and supporting multilingualism.

Note

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