Use them or lose them: There’s more at stake than language in reviving Ryukyuan tongues

BY 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 Ryukyu 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 darō.” 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 Ryukyu 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 Ryukyuans and mainland Japanese, but also with the aim of making Ryukyuans “Japanese.”

This process — called nation building — was taking place across the modern 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 Ryukyuans, as well as the Ogasawara and Hachijo islanders.

From the late 19th century, all other 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: Ryukyuans 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.ryukyuans.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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