

The Ryukyus and the New, But Endangered, Languages of Japan

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Luchuan (Ryukyuan) languages are no longer Japanese dialects

On 21 February 2009, the international mother language day, UNESCO launched the online version of its 'Atlas of the world's languages in danger'. This electronic version that will also be published as the third edition of the UNESCO Atlas in May 2009, now includes the Luchuan [Ryukyuan] languages of Japan (UNESCO 2009). 'Luchuan' is the Uchinaaguchi (Okinawan language) term for the Japanese 'Ryukyu'. Likewise 'Okinawa' is 'Uchinaa' in Uchinaaguchi. Well taken, UNESCO recognizes six languages of the Luchu Islands [Ryukyu Islands] of which two are severely endangered, Yaeyama and Yonaguni, and four are classified as definitely endangered, Amami, Kunigami, Uchinaa [Okinawa] and Miyako (see UNESCO 2003 for assessing language vitality and endangerment).

Through publication of the atlas, UNESCO recognizes the linguistic diversity in present-day Japan and, by that, challenges the long-standing misconception of a monolingual Japanese nation state that has its roots in the linguistic and colonizing policies of the Meiji period. The formation of a Japanese nation

state with one unifying language triggered the assimilation of regional varieties (*hogen*) under the newly created standard 'national language' (*kokugo*) all over the country (Carroll 2001). What is more, through these processes, distinct languages were downgraded to *hogen*, i.e. mere 'dialects' in accordance with the dominant national ideology (Fija & Heinrich 2007).



Fija Bairon teaching an Uchinaaguchi language class at Duisburg-Essen University (Germany)

The entire group of the Luchuan languages - linguistic relatives of the otherwise isolated Japanese language - is about to disappear. These languages are being replaced by standard Japanese (*hyojungo* or *kyotsugo*) as a result of the Japanization of the Luchuan Islands, which started with the Japanese annexation of these islands in 1872 and was more purposefully carried out after the establishment of Okinawa Prefecture in 1879. In public schools, Luchuan children were

educated to become Japanese and they were no longer allowed to speak their own language at schools following the ‘Ordinance of dialect regulation’ (*hogen torishimari-rei*) in 1907 (ODJKJ 1983, vol. III: 443-444). Spreading Standard Japanese was a key measure for transforming Luchu Islanders into Japanese nationals and for concealing the fact that Japanese was multilingual and multicultural (Heinrich 2004).

The US occupation of Uchinaa after World War II, which – at least formally – ended in 1972, marks the final stage in the fading of the Luchuan languages. In their attempts to separate Uchinaa from mainland Japan, Americans emphasized the distinctiveness of the Luchuan languages and cultures and encouraged their development. This US policy of dividing Luchuan from Japan, however, backfired and gave rise to a Luchuan Japanization movement. Today, even the remaining – mainly elderly – Luchuan language speakers generally refer to their languages as *hogen*, i.e. Japanese ‘dialects’, accepting in so doing the downgrading of their heritage languages for the assumed sake of national unity.

In support of the UNESCO approach, Sakiyama Osamu, professor emeritus of linguistics at the National Museum of Ethnology, stated that “a dialect should be treated as an independent language if its speakers have a distinct culture” (Kunisue 2009). However, linguistic studies also prove that these speech forms should be treated as languages in their own right (e.g. Miyara 2008), distinct both from Japanese as well as from one another. According to results employing the lexicostatistics method (Hattori 1954), the Luchuan languages share only between 59 and 68 percent cognates with Tokyo Japanese. These figures are lower than those between German and English. Scholars, as well as speakers, agree that there is no mutual intelligibility between these languages (Matsumori 1995). Thus calling them *hogen*

(dialects of Japanese) may satisfy national demands of obedience but is problematic on linguistic and historical grounds.

Luchuan language description and dialectology

The two most important aspects of the UNESCO initiative for the Luchuan languages are, first, the encouragement to write grammars and dictionaries, i.e. to initiate a new phase of language documentation and, second, to lend support, by recognition, for community and official language maintenance activities. Despite the generally high standards of linguistic scholarship in Japan, the documentation of the Luchuan languages remains unsatisfactory (Ishihara 2009). Two reasons might be responsible for this situation. First, the Luchuan languages are predominantly still studied as ‘dialects’ of Japan’s ‘national language’ (*kokugo*), or Japanese *tout court*. Second, Japan’s unfortunate division of linguistics into two branches, i.e. ‘general linguistic’ (*gengogaku*) and ‘national [identity] linguistics’ (*kokugogaku*) (Koyama 2003), resulted in an almost complete lack of studies on Luchuan languages by general linguists.

Kokugogaku linguists have always treated, and continue to treat, the Luchuan languages as ‘dialects’. As a result, the Luchuan languages have been studied in a dialectology framework, which proves inadequate for documenting distinct languages. Japan’s ‘National Institute for Japanese Language’ (*Kokuritsu kokugo kenkyujo*, literally ‘National Language Research Institute’) lists 211 publications on the Luchuan languages in their ‘Yearbook of National Language Studies’ in the last 10 years, 90% of which refer to these languages as ‘dialects’. The category under which these publications are compiled in the yearbook is ‘Okinawa and Amami dialects’ and even the most important journal for research on the Luchuan languages is incongruously named

'*Ryukyu no hogen*' (Ryukyu Dialects). Most studies of Luchuan languages have been conducted by dialectologists, who have no training in language documentation. Hence, not surprisingly, in employing UNESCO's (2003) tool for assessing the quality of language documentation, the Luchuan languages score a meagre 2 points out of a possible 5, a documentation level referred to as 'fragmentary'.

Language documentation has developed over the last decade in response to an increased awareness of the threads to the world's language diversity among linguists. The global spread of language endangerment became visible in the 1990s in publications such as *Endangered Languages*, edited by Robert Robins and Eugenius Uhlenbeck in 1991. Studies followed, focusing on the underlying processes that lead to language shift, as in *Language Death*, edited by Matthias Brenzinger in 1992. Nikolaus Himmelmann (1998) and others initiated the development of descriptive linguistics towards languages documentation, i.e. the recording, analysing and preserving of endangered languages. In addition to traditional linguistic descriptions, language documentation demands a comprehensive approach, which includes in addition to classical language annotation and analysis, description of the sociolinguistic environment, as well as questions concerning archiving the data. Finally, scholars, such as Arienne Dwyer (2006), began to reflect on the relationship between linguists, speakers and languages, i.e. on ethical and legal aspects of language work. Today, language documentation - unlike language description of the past - is predicated on a cooperative approach, i.e. the active involvement of linguistic communities in the planning and conducting of fieldwork, as well as in the dissemination of the research results.

In order to improve language documentation in the Luchuan islands one would need to

encourage linguists trained in language documentation to conduct research on Japan's endangered languages and at the same time involve the existing *kokugogaku* studies (and scholars) within a language documentation framework. The recognition of the language status in UNESCO's online atlas might prove an important influence on this new research outline. How urgent and important a thorough reconsidering of existing works on the Luchuan languages really is can be seen in the publications of the 'Endangered Languages of the Pacific Rim' project. While explicitly aiming to document endangered languages, all publications of the project series perpetuate the image of the Luchuan languages as 'dialects' of 'national language'. Research of this type is indifferent towards, at best, and at worst undermines community efforts to revitalizing local languages. Statements like the following, both taken from publications of the 'Endangered Languages of the Pacific Rim' project have a devastating effect on language documentation and maintenance activities.

"Apart from the material recorded and preserved by researchers, the traditional dialects of the islands and communities of the Ryukyus cannot escape oblivion." (Uemura 2001: 193).

And

"People have to learn a different language. It is desirable for them to enter into the world of common Japanese language as soon as possible. The old traditional dialects are becoming useless for their social lives." (Izuyama 2003: 12).

This is not exactly the stance one might expect

from scholars working on endangered languages, but more importantly, these views fuel the ideologically and political mediated misconceptions that there is only one language in Japan and that there is no future, even for the so-called Luchuan ‘dialects’. See Heinrich (2009a) for discussion of possible uses, functions and benefits of the Luchuan languages in the 21st century.

The current situation of Luchuan language documentation is a result of a politically and ideologically marred research policy. The first assessment of the Luchuan languages as ‘dialects’ of Japanese were made by Japanese administrators in the wake of Japan’s annexation of the Luchu Kingdom, without any linguistic research. In negotiating with Luchuan, actually mainly with Chinese authorities over the future affiliation and status of the Luchu Islands, ‘Ryukyu Dispensation Superintendent’ (*Ryukyu shobunkan*) Matsuda Michiyuki stressed the ‘historical, cultural and linguistic’ correspondences between Japan and the Luchu Islands (Oguma 1998: 28-29). The first linguistic research revealed a quite different picture. Basil Hall Chamberlain’s pioneering study of the Luchuan languages, conducted in 1893, established evidence of a shared Luchuan-Japanese genealogy. In explaining the difference between Uchinaaguchi [Uchinaa language] and Japanese, Chamberlain (1895 [1999]: 6) wrote:

“On the whole, we shall not be far from wrong if we compare the mutual relation of the two languages to that of Spanish and Italian, or perhaps rather of Spanish and French.”

Chamberlain’s analysis did not comply with Japanese national ideologies which stressed the firm division of a ‘national language’ into two ‘greater dialects’ (*dai-hogen*), i.e. ‘Ryukyu greater dialects’ (*Ryukyu dai-hogen*) and

‘homeland greater dialects’ (*naichi dai-hogen*). This classification was established by the founding father of Japanese dialectology, Tojo Misao, in his groundbreaking ‘Dialect map of Greater Japan’ (*Dai-nihon hogen chizu*). Tojo (1927: 18) adopted Chamberlain’s view that the Luchuan languages were genealogically related to Japanese but then concluded that both are part of the ‘national language’ (*kokugo*):

“Since [Luchuan] is a language which has split from the same ancestor language [as Japanese] and, besides this, the use of the language is limited within the boundaries of the same nation state, I would like to regard it as one dialect of the national language.” [All translations from Japanese into English by Patrick Heinrich].

In a later publication, Tojo (1938: 6) substantiated his view, defining ‘dialect’ in the following way:

“If a national language is broken up into a number of language groups, which differ with regard to pronunciation, lexicon and grammar according to the different regions in which they are used, the various groups are called dialects.”

Based on the ideologically-driven claim of Japan being a monolingual nation, Luchuan people were not considered to be speaking languages of their own. *Kokugogaku* linguists understood it to be their duty to provide arguments that allow for classifying the Luchuan languages as dialects, no matter how clumsy these classifications might be (‘greater dialects’, ‘language group’). Having established Luchuan as a dialect of the ‘national language’, its

speakers consequently were also Japanese. Such arguments have been internalized by *kokugogaku* linguists ever since. Furthermore, this academic deprecation has led to a widespread acceptance of the inferior status of their language by many Luchuans.

Fija Bairon’s lecture on the ‘language - dialect’ issue on Youtube

Since its establishment during the period of nation state formation, linguistic research has been instrumental in creating the ideologically motivated imagination of a homogenous Japanese nation by marginalizing Japan’s minority languages (Koyama 2003). Up to now, Luchuan languages have almost exclusively been studied by dialectologists and then of course as ‘dialects’ and not by general linguists, with the notable exceptions of Osumi Midori (2001) and Matsumori Akiko (1995). There is no tradition of language documentation or sociolinguistic research of the Luchuan languages. The political downgrading of the Luchuan languages as ‘dialects’ has made them invisible in the international discourse on endangered languages, as for example pointed out by Brenzinger (2007: xv). It still obstructs adequate language documentation and linguistic research, and most crucially, it undermines language maintenance and revitalization attempts.

The publication of the new UNESCO atlas challenges these malpractices and is an important support for pioneering attempts at Luchuan language documentation, such as the one carried out by Shimoji Michinori. His recently compiled Reference Grammar of Irabu, a language variety of Miyako, was accepted by the Australian National University as a PhD thesis in December 2008. Together with Miyara Shinsho’s (1995) Grammar of Yaeyama, these

works mark a new phase of research on the Luchuan languages. Karimata Shigehisa’s ‘Ryukyuan audio database’ (*Ryukyugo onsei detabesu*) on the Shuri/Naha variety of Uchinaaguchi and the Nakijin variety of the Kunigami language sets standards for the documentation of other Ryukyuan languages. Easily accessible due to its [internet based platform](#), it is helpful and popular for speakers, activists and researchers alike.



Fija Bairon discussing Uchinaaguchi with Karimata Shigehisa

Language use in the Luchuan Islands

The crucial phase of the decline of the Luchuan languages started with communal language shifts in the 1950s. At that time, local speech communities decided in large numbers not to transmit their languages to the following generation. Languages vanish by being used less often and in fewer domains. With the loss of the last domain, namely the home, the Luchuan languages have entered the final phase of becoming extinct.

Experts on Luchuan language study are in complete agreement that the natural intergenerational language transmission of the Luchuan languages was interrupted in the early 1950s (Hokama 1991, 2000, Matsumori 1995,

Motonaga 1994, Osumi 2001, Uemura 1997). This observation has been confirmed by empirical research across the Luchus (Heinrich 2007, 2009b).

The question why language shift occurred at this particular time is intriguing and Nakamoto (1990: 467) singles it out as one of the foremost desiderata in Luchuan language studies. The reason why we still lack conclusive insights into these language shifts is that language shift is triggered by a complex mix of seemingly endless variables, of which some of the most important include economy, community patterns, family networks, marriage patterns, perception of cultural distance to other speech communities, religious practices, and assessment of local wealth and future prospects. It is this complex mixture of variables which leads Brenzinger (1997: 278) to observe that “no two language shifts resemble each other”, a view supported by the case of the Luchuan languages. Consider the results of questionnaire surveys conducted by Heinrich in 2005 and 2006.

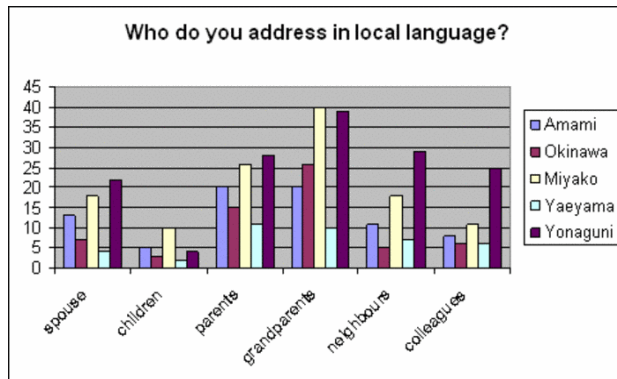


Figure 1: Who do you address in local language? (448 consultants)

This chart reveals different degrees of language vitality, with the local language being most widely used in Yonaguni and Miyako. Yonaguni stands out because the local language is widely used in the neighbourhood, due to the *Gemeinschaft* (community) character

of an isolated island with 1.600 inhabitants. Also worthy of notice is the frequent local language use among work colleagues, which is largely due to the lack of development of the secondary and tertiary economic sector in Yonaguni. Note, however, that the local language in Yonaguni is just as rarely used towards children as elsewhere. As a matter of fact, the restraint on use of local language towards children is the most consistent result across the five speech communities of Amami, Uchinaa, Miyako, Yaeyama and Yonaguni. (The sixth Luchuan language according to the UNESCO atlas, i.e. Kunigami, was at that time unfortunately not recognized as an independent language by Heinrich). On the lower end of language vitality, we find the Yaeyama language. Since endangered languages are always spoken in multilingual communities, specific domains of local language use must be maintained to secure their continued use. The most crucial domains for local language are the family and the local neighbourhood (*shima* or *chima* in the Luchuan languages, hence the term *shimakutuba*, ‘community language’). On the basis of the results presented in Figure 1, we see that the prospects for language maintenance are, at present, most favourable on Miyako Island. For more detailed discussions on language shift in the Luchu islands see Heinrich and Matsuo (2009).

Luchuan language endangerment is the result of the local language suppression campaigns which started in 1907 and became most intense after 1940. They played a crucial role in stigmatizing these languages (Heinrich 2004). Pivotal in subsequent oppression was the ‘Movement for enforcement of standard language’ (*hyojungo reiko undo*). A particularly notorious and obviously quite effective form of local language repression was the use of ‘dialect-tags’ (*hogen fuda*), the use of which increased drastically in the 1920s and 1930s, peaking at the time of the general mobilization campaign (Kondo 2006). A stigmatizing dialect-tag had to be worn around the neck to punish

students who used expressions from a Luchuan language in the classroom.

Political developments after 1945, with the US promotion of Luchuan nationalism, led many Luchuans to escape the existing dismal living conditions by seeking reversion to Japan. While US occupiers sought to foster the establishment of Luchuan as a national language, the Luchuan people opted for the opposite (Nakachi 1989: 27), “easily seeing through the ‘Ryukyu-ization’ campaign as a propaganda ploy to prolong the American military occupation” (Rabson 1999: 146). Instead of an increase in language loyalty, Luchuans shifted from their Luchuan languages to Japanese, even in their homes. The hardships that Luchuans experienced under US occupation, ranging from malaria outbreaks, confiscation of land, the complete destruction of infrastructure, the collapse of the education system to the omnipresent discrimination by US Americans (see e.g. Time Magazine 1957-12-12) produced resistance measures. In 1952, on the occasion of restoring Japan’s sovereignty in the San Francisco Peace Treaty, more than two thirds of the Luchuan electorate voted for a return to Japan. However, the US occupation continued (Kreiner 2001: 450-451). Nevertheless, reversion to Japan was not welcome by all. Luchuans were left with bitter memories of Japan including pre-war discriminations of various sorts and the Battle of Okinawa when some Japanese military units imposed forced suicides (*shudan jiketsu*) on Okinawan citizens (see Oe 2008). Many expressed doubts about reversion.^[i]

Reversion to Japan, as a means of improving livelihood in the Luchu islands, led many Luchuans to engage in proving their genuine Japaneseness both to mainland Japan and to the US (Oguma 1998: 564). Given the ideological view of Japan as a monolingual nation state, speaking Japanese became perceived as a key factor in the ‘reversion movement’ (*fukki undō*) which called to ‘return

Japanese to Japan’ (*nihonjin wa nihon e kaese*). The reversion movement was predominantly led by school teachers, who were responsible for both, a strong promotion of Japanese and for constituting the reversion issue as a popular non-party movement. Yara Chobyō (1902-1997), one of many Luchuan teacher turned politician at the time and a prominent leader of the reversion movement, promulgated in 1968 a three-point strategy for reversion in which (language) education features most prominently (quoted from Anhalt 1991: 45):

1. Educate Okinawan children as Japanese according to the Japanese school system
2. Inclusion of teachers and all interested into ‘pressure groups’
3. Spread of the reversion movement on the Japanese mainland

Since the Luchuan languages had been severely stigmatized before, these languages were given up without much regret at that time. Hence, Japanese and not the Luchuan languages served as an emancipatory tool in the eyes of many Luchuans under the US occupation, which ended in 1972 but with US bases intact down to today. The languages were sacrificed in hope for a better future.

The language shifts on the Luchu Islands in the 1950s were sweeping (cf. Heinrich 2007, 2009b). With the rise of the popular reversion movement, parents started to address their children in Japanese only. In Uchinaa, Yaeyama and Yonaguni, those born after 1950 can usually no longer speak any Luchuan language. The situation on Amami and Miyako is slightly different. Amami as part of Kagoshima Prefecture, has been considered to be part of

mainland Japan since the Meiji period by many. Language shift in Amami was probably less drastic due to the fact that the Amami people did not suffer from language repression campaigns. Therefore, language shift set in earlier in Amami than in the rest of the Luchu islands, but it was less drastic. The linguistic situation in Amami is today the most stabilized. Mixed Amami-Japanese, called *tonfutsugo* (literally potato standard) is widely used across all three generations (Heinrich 2007). Secondly, in Amami the reversion movement ended in December 1953, when the US returned the island group to Japan. Miyako also did not experience radical language shifts, but for quite different reasons. Miyako people shifted only gradually to Japanese. While a detailed account for this is not yet possible and would require detailed field work, the reasons seem to include the absence of in-migration and continuance of subsistence farming.

Nevertheless, all Luchuan languages will disappear by 2050 if speech communities and supportive linguists do not act immediately. The establishment of Luchuan heritage language education (Heinrich 2008) and of Japanese language policy supportive of Japanese diversity (Katsuragi 2005, 2007) are necessary for preventing language loss. Official support for language revitalization remains weak but some promising developments can be observed. The most important step was certainly the establishment of the annual *shimakutuba no hi* (community language day) in 2004, an event supported by Okinawa Prefecture since 2006 (Ishihara 2009). In the absence of more comprehensive and structured institutional support, however, language revitalization will not be possible at some point in the very near future, and it is already difficult to reverse the language shift. Even in outlying islands (*ritto*) the use of Luchuan language is declining in neighbourhoods and only older generations know and speak Luchuan languages. The retreat of local language use on Iheiya, an outlying islands in

the vicinity of Uchinaa, led to the posting of a billboard which reads 'On Sunday it's community language' (*nichiyobi wa shimakutuba*) (Nishimura 2001: 164).

Today, some of the few remaining domains of Luchuan language use are arts, prayers, festivals and religious rites. However, even in these domains, the Luchuan languages have been under pressure (see e.g. Clarke 1979, Ishihara 2009). What is more, these domains are largely detached from daily life. The current situation is what Fishman (1991) has termed a 'folklorization' scenario, i.e. the heritage language is no longer used for communication but merely as a symbol in very limited situations. Languages can, however, not be maintained with such symbolic functions alone.

Especially among the young generation a kind of language crossing is widespread. These new hybrid varieties, in which Japanese is mixed with elements of Luchuan languages, are widely used in informal situations. They are not Creoles as some researchers claim (e.g. Karimata 2006), but are a specific kind of mixed language. Creole languages emerge in contact situations in which two speech communities do not share a language, and hence create on the basis of their respective languages a third language for the sake of communication. Mixed languages, on the other hand, are purposefully formed for the sake of setting their speakers apart from other speech communities (Kaye & Tosco 2003: 22). It goes without saying that present-day Luchuans and mainland Japanese do not encounter communication problems which necessitate the creation of a Creole. The grammatical matrix of these hybrid language varieties, which differ considerably between islands and generations, is that of standard Japanese while the words or inflections inserted are either from the local languages or are in themselves mixtures of local language and Japanese (see below). In this way it is somewhat similar to incorporating

English words into Japanese, a process in which pronunciation and semantic range is also affected.

Mixed language varieties (e.g. *Uchinaayamatoguchi* in Uchinaa or *Tonfutsugo* in Amami) account for a large percentage of language choices in private domains today. Across the Luchu Islands, mixed language varieties accounted for 35% of the language choices among the age cohort between 30 and 60; those younger than 30 chose mixed varieties in 43% of the cases for communicating in private domains (Heinrich 2007: 8-9).

As an example of mixed Uchinaa-Japanese (*uchinaa-yamatoguchi*) consider the following transcription of a radio program in Uchinaa taken from Sugita (2009):

Yoosuru ni ano: [waja] mo [fuyuu shii] suru hito ga:, [fuyuu shii] shita ato ni nani ka shippai shite [[kara nye]] “[Ee shimusa: yaa nankuru nai sa]” tte iu no to:. [[Sakkoo]] ganbatte shigoto shite ite: nayande: “[chaasu ga yaa. chaasu ga yaa.]” tte mainichi nayande ru hito ni: “[[Daijoobu yo.]] [Anshi] nayande mo [yaa,] isshookenmei [soo-ru bun] [nankuru nai sa]” to. Iu tsukaikata: ryooohoo aru wake desu yo ne:.

[] uchinaaguchi

[[]] uchinaayamatoguchi

Japanese

Yoosuru ni ano: [shigoto] mo [namakete] iru hito ga, [namakete] ta ato ni nani ka shippai shite

“[Shooganai naa. nankuru nai sa]” tte iu no to, [[sugoku]] ganbatte shigoto shite ite, nayande, “doo shiyoo. doo shiyoo.” tte mainichi nayande ru hito ni, “[[daijoobu da yo.]] [sonna ni] nayande mo [nee,] isshookenmei [yatteru bun nankuru nai sa]” to iu tsukaikata ryooohoo aru wake desu yo ne.

English

I mean, well, to say the person who is doing the [job] [halfheartedly], after having worked [halfheartedly] and making a mistake, “[Well, it can't be helped, you know. You deserve it.]”, and to say to the person who is working [[very]] hard, but being worried like “[What should I do? What should I do?]” being worried every day, “[[Take it easy.]] Don't worry [so much]. When you are working so hard, [it will work out.]” It is that we have both usages, right?

The use of language mixed in such a way is Uchinaayamatoguchi, with this particular utterance involving particularly extensive Uchinaaguchi. Despite the lack of any support and prestige, these mixed language varieties are currently spreading into an increasing number of domains in the Luchu islands. This language change from below is significant because it testifies to the lack of Luchuan language proficiency among the younger generations as well as the desire to use language varieties different from Standard Japanese in the Luchu Islands. Whether the ongoing language shift to these mixed language varieties will ultimately replace the local languages in informal situations or whether it

will lead to heightened efforts at revitalisation of the local languages can at present not be predicted with confidence.

Luchuan communities, in particular those in Amami, Uchinaa and Yaeyama are shifting from Standard Japanese to mixed language in private domains today. Where the local language is strongly stigmatized, as in Yaeyama, such shift is less thorough than in places where the local language is less stigmatized, such as in Amami. For the time being, it seems that both the Luchuan languages and Standard Japanese are declining in favour of the use of the mixed language. Yonaguni is an exception in this respect; mixed language varieties are not popular mainly due to the outmigration of large parts of the younger generation. Yonaguni has lost two thirds of its population in the last 50 years.

The shift towards mixed language in most Luchuan Islands today reveals a yearning for local language. Whether this will lead to Luchuan language revitalization, to a further popularization of mixed languages or to both, remains to be seen. Much hinges on the question whether Luchuans can maintain and develop beneficial usages for the Luchuan languages in the future.

Fija Bairon speaking Uchinaaguchi with his Shuri language consultant Yakabi Tomoko

Is there still a place for Luchuan languages?

Languages constitute important tools for protecting and expanding the rights of their speakers and providing a range of meaningful options. Local languages are, for instance, a powerful tool for renegotiating the terms of integration of speech communities within the

majority society (Kymlicka 1995: 67). It is exactly this that made Kayano Shigeru, the first Ainu to become a member of the Japanese Diet in 1994, deliver his inauguration speech in Ainu (Maher 2001). Kayano was a lifelong devotee of teaching Ainu language and preserving Ainu culture. And may have been one of the very last people fluent in Ainu as a daily language as well as a ritual language (see e.g. Kayano 1994). It is this instrumentality of language which leads May (2001: 315) to state that “the arguments of minority groups for the retention of their ethnic, cultural and linguistic identities are most often not characterized by a retreat into traditionalism or cultural essentialism but, rather, by a more autonomous construction of group identity and political deliberation.” Readers of Japan Focus will be aware that there is no shortage of arguments in the Luchu Islands for such deliberations. Luchuan issues such as the ‘schoolbook debate’ (Aniya 2008), the ‘base problem’ (Yoshida 2008), its related ‘environmental problems’ (Sakurai 2008) and the repeated ‘rape incidents by military personnel’ (Johnson 2008) highlight the necessity of renegotiating the conditions according to which the Luchu Islands are part of the Japanese state. Language has not been used as an argument by those seeking such renegotiation to their detriment.

Naming is yet another aspect, where the benefits of local languages is manifest. As a matter of fact, Fija Bairon, deliberately changed his name from the Japanese reading ‘Higa’ to the Uchinaa reading ‘Fija’. As motive for changing his name, Fija points to discrimination both towards him as an Uchinaa person of Western appearance and Japanese nationality, and towards the culture he identifies with, Uchinaa. Upon starting to appear in Uchinaa media regularly, ‘Higa Bairon’ decided to henceforth adopt the name ‘Fija Bairon’ (see Fija & Heinrich 2007 for details). His new name serves Fija as a welcome entry to discuss naming issues with people he meets or interacts with through the

media. It serves Fija as a means to inform and influence fellow Luchuans on their views on Uchinaa’s cultural and linguistic heritage as well as on their views of him as a person. Fija also prefers the Uchinaaguchi terms Uchinaa [Okinawa], Uchinaaguchi [Okinawan] and Luchu [Ryukyu], and this article follows his terminological suggestions.



Fija Bairon at Radio Okinawa

Personal names and toponyms give testimony to Luchu’s oppressed past. Consider once more the example of Fija / Higa. The name was originally written with the Chinese character denoting ‘east’ (東) which was read ‘Fija’. It was only after 1624, when the Satsuma Domain (today’s Kagoshima Prefecture), which had invaded the Luchu Kingdom in 1609, tried to conceal its influence on the Kingdom *from* the Shogunate, that Luchuans were forcefully made to change the written characters of their names. The reason was that Satsuma wanted them to appear more ‘foreign’ in order to obscure its influence on the Kingdom. This is the background upon which the Chinese characters denoting ‘Fija’ were changed from 東 into 比嘉 (Beillevaire 2001: 83). Still, the name continued to be read as ‘Fija’. After all, Fija sounded ‘un-Japanese’ enough to the Satsuma colonizers.

Things changed again with the establishment of

the Meiji state, i.e. the establishment of a state into which one imagined Japanese nation needed to be moulded. The Chinese characters 比嘉 were then required to be read ‘Higa’ in order to assimilate Luchuans with such ‘un-Japanese’ sounding names into the newly invented linguistic and cultural homogeneous nation. Recovering the names as read before assimilation into the Japanese nation state exposes the problems of Luchu’s colonial past (see e.g. Christy 1993, Oguma 1998) and its lingering influences on its linguistic and cultural heritage today. How Luchuans name themselves, their islands, communities and languages has not been for Luchuans to decide. If Luchuans want to restore control over their fates, their cultural and linguistic heritage, then names might be a good place to start. This, in a nutshell, is what led Fija to abandon the Japanese name Higa in favour of Uchinaa Fija.

Language rights and true recognition

Within the discourses on linguistic diversity, four different directions can be discerned, a linguistic, an aesthetic, an economic and a moral discourse. The linguistic discourse is rather straightforwardly concerned with the ongoing loss of linguistic diversity on an unprecedented scale. It has been framed in a seminal article by Michael Krauss (1992: 10) in which he wrote “[o]bviously we must do some serious rethinking of our priorities, lest linguists go down in history as the only science that presided obliviously over the disappearance of 90% of the very field to which it is dedicated.” This line of thought underlies a large part of endangered language studies, which seek to describe languages before they vanish in order to gain a better understanding into parameters of human language or into histories of language development and spread. The latter point has been repeatedly made with regard to the Luchuan languages (e.g. Uemura 2003). The aesthetic discourse is likewise straightforward. Many of us enjoy diversity,

regardless of whether it is in food, in landscape, climate or in language. Luchuan ‘folk music’ (Roberson 2003), literature (Molasky & Rabson 2000) or speech contests (Hara 2005) enjoy the popularity they do largely due to an audience enjoying the diversity which is thereby presented. Economic discourse, that is to say, assessing the economic benefits which specific languages offer their speakers and the way such benefits can be measured and influenced, is the least developed field. Pioneering work in this direction has been undertaken by scholars such as Coulmas (1993) and Grin (2003). Such work still awaits application in the field of Luchuan languages.

The moral discourse, finally, is well developed in the West but underdeveloped in Japan. Moral discourse on language endangerment stresses that it is the languages of those on the shorter end of the power divide which get lost. The major underlying sentiments of this kind of discourse are that of fairness and support for linguistic diversity. Language frequently appears in key documents of the United Nations on human rights and there is a growing literature on this topic in Western scholarship (e.g. de Varennes 1996). In Japan, the issue of language rights has yet to emerge as a prominent form of discourse. The large scale lack of such discourse is primarily due to absence of a frame for ethnic autochthonous minorities in Japan (see Nakamura 2006). That is to say, in contrast to the West, no interpretive schema is readily available in Japan where the right to use one’s language can be derived from one’s ethnic, cultural or otherwise framed minority status. Most Luchuans do not conceive of themselves as language minorities. Despite compelling evidence that the Luchuan language varieties are languages in their own right, the majority of Luchuans call these language varieties ‘dialects’ (see Fija & Heinrich 2007). As we have seen above, the framing of Luchuans being part of the Japanese ‘nation’ was the

main objective of the Luchuan irredentist reversion movement of the 1950s and 1960s. It is hence not surprising to see that the sole attempt, to date, to claim language rights by the Okinawan Society for Language Revitalization (*Uchinaaguchi fukyu kyogikai*) in 2005 has so far been totally ignored. One of the key tasks in language maintenance and the rationalization for language documentation and language education will thus be to frame the relevance of such endeavors in a Japanese context. Here, again, the inclusion of the Luchuan languages into the ‘Atlas of the world’s languages in danger’ provides for much needed assistance to all those who seek to maintain the Luchuan languages or to establish Luchuan heritage language education.

At present, institutional support for language documentation and education programs is dismal. There exists only one chair for Luchuan linguistics (Prof. Karimata Shigehisa at the University of the Ryukyus), too little for overseeing the six Luchuan languages on the various levels of linguistic description. No study program on Ryukyuan linguistics has been established. Contrary to expectations, the ‘Research Centre for the Languages of Okinawa’ (*Okinawa gengo kenkyujo*), founded in 1978, has no rooms, no budget, no phone number, no homepage. It is merely a name under which activities of predominantly dialectological research are summarized. Three research institutes for Luchuan Studies exist worldwide (Hosei University Tokyo, Waseda University Tokyo, University of Hawai’i). The notable fact is that none of them is located in the Luchu Islands. Language documentation programs are not established at these centres at present, nor does language constitute a research focus there. No archive exists where Luchuan language data is collected, maintained and made accessible to researchers and community members. There are no conferences on Luchuan linguistics and no plans or initiatives exist for establishing institutions for Luchuan language documentation and

maintenance. In short, the lack of adequate institutional support and funding is another factor which contributes to the endangerment of the Luchuan languages. Nevertheless, there are some promising developments. They include the establishment of the ‘Society for Okinawan Language Revitalization’ (*Uchinaaguchi fukyu kyogikai*) in 2000, the establishment of a ‘Sub-committee of Endangered Languages’ (*Kiki gengo shoikai*) at the Linguistic Society of Japan in 2003, and Shimoji Michinori’s recently established Luchuan linguist mailing-list. Many more such activities need to follow.



Matthias Brenzinger with linguistics students at the University of the Ryukyus

Since language shift in the Luchu Islands originated as a product of Japanese language nationalism, reversing language shift requires the reversal of the ideological views which led Luchuans to abandon these languages in first place. To a considerable extent, language attitudes in the Luchu Islands have already changed. This is evidenced by the positive language attitudes many hold towards local languages today. A questionnaire survey by the local newspaper *Ryukyu Shinpo* revealed that more than 90% expressed some kind of affection for *hogen*, i.e. the Luchuan local languages (*Ryukyu shinpo sha* 2007: 25). Questionnaire surveys conducted by Heinrich revealed that an average of 73% of all

consultants across the Luchuan Islands support the idea of introducing their respective local language into local school education. In view of such changing language attitudes, the restoration of the local languages might become possible. This requires the establishment of language documentation, revitalization and teaching programs. Towards this end, a reorientation of linguistic scholarship is unavoidable.



Fija Bairon discusses Uchinaaguchi teaching materials with Sugita Yuko

Japan’s newly recognized multilingualism in the UNESCO Atlas raises some inconvenient questions about Japanese scholarship. How is it that Japan, a country with hundreds of universities and thousands of linguists never doubted that it was monolingual? What is it which makes scholars term languages ‘dialects’, despite the well known lack of mutual intelligibility and unshared linguistic innovations between them, the need to develop distinct orthographies, independent language development going back to pre-history, in other words, clear indications that they are dealing with languages? Linguistic scholarship in which such questions are not tackled reflects a clear political agenda. It reproduces Meiji period nation-imagining ideology despite the fact that such ideology has long been critiqued (see e.g. Koyama 2003, Lee 1996, Yasuda 1999). The

suppression of linguistic diversity in Japan takes sometimes bizarre forms. A talk by Fija Bairon at the University of the Ryukyus titled *'Hogen aibiran, Uchinaaguchi'* ('It is not a dialect, but Uchinaa language') was reported upon in BBTV's 'Dialect news' (*hogen nyusu*) program in February 2009. On the other hand, it is exactly these kinds of contradictions which lead to reflection and discussion about the status of the local languages in the Luchu islands.

Recognition of Japan's linguistic diversity does not affect Japanese citizens alone. Recognition of Japanese linguistic diversity and a shift towards valuing Japan's multilingual heritage also affects perspectives and treatment of the languages of Japanese migrants. Japan's policy of internationalization (*kokusai-ka*) incorporates strong elements of nationalism. *Kokusai-ka* policy has placed much attention on national pride as a basis for Japanese interacting on a global level. Hence, the running gag that *kokusai-ka* ('internationalization') is actually *kokusui-ka* ('nationalization'). Much Japanese discourse on *kokusai-ka* regularly perceives internationalization as requiring a reaction to counteract unwelcome outside influences. It thus reproduces a rigid confrontation between the Japanese state and the outside world (see e.g. McVeigh 2002).

In language shift driven by language nationalism, the loss of local languages is the victory of uniformity and of cultural and linguistic intolerance. A state and its inhabitants not valuing the linguistic and cultural plurality within the confines of its own borders cannot convincingly claim to be just doing that with regard to international languages and cultures. One either values plurality or one does not. Gottlieb (2007) is right in her assessment that Japan's internationalization crucially requires an undoing of the foreigner-Japanese binary, which, in turn, involves reducing the

'foreignness' of foreigners and, of equally crucial importance, debunking the idea of an inherent and uniform 'Japaneseness' among Japanese nationals. In this sense, the Luchu Islands can serve as an important means for the 'de-parochialization' of Japan's majority, which recognizes only their language and culture. It can serve as a means to create more tolerant orders and attitudes, more befitting today's diversifying and globalizing world.

The release of the online version of the UNESCO Atlas is an important instance of internationalizing the discourse on Japan's language situation. The release of the atlas coincided with a workshop on [language documentation](#) of the Luchuan languages ('Linking language and heritage'), held at the University of the Ryukyus in Nishihara Town, Okinawa.



The organizers of the workshop Ishihara Masahide and Patrick Heinrich

Leading scholars on the Ryukyuan languages were part of this workshop and the UNESCO initiative triggered an academic discourse among them. Most scholars welcomed the acknowledgment of the Luchuan speech forms as languages and took this as a chance for encouraging language documentation. Others reacted defensively and felt uneasy about this emancipatory step pushed from abroad. Some

feared that the UNESCO atlas might have opened a Pandora's Box in that "we might end up with hundreds of languages in Japan".



Christoph Goro Kimura (right) reporting the release of the UNESCO Atlas to participants of the workshop (from left: Shibuya Kenjiro, Yamada Takao, Patrick Heinrich)

Some linguists frankly confess that even though their own research findings prove a deeply rooted linguistic distance between Japanese and the Luchuan languages and also among them, they still opt for retaining the term *hogen*, i.e. dialect, for purely socio-political reasons. Even speaking about Luchuan 'languages', to them is almost a rebellious act, challenging no less than the unity of the Japanese nation state. Whether language or dialect, however, is not a question of personal taste or an academic dalliance; the fate of the Luchuan languages heavily depends on the right choice. The right choice, we argue, can only be that of a linguistic scholarship which is detached from Japanese nation state ideology and squarely centred on linguistic facts.



At the language documentation workshop: Hara Kiyoshi, Matthias Brenzinger, Karimata Shigehisa, Patrick Heinrich

For decades, Japan and Japanese scholars have played leading roles in UNESCO activities related to the documentation and support of endangered languages all over the globe. It was long overdue that the Japanese finally also started to look at the language diversity in their country. The new, now international discourses on Japanese language diversity will hopefully not only spur language documentation, but also foster language maintenance activities. At a market in Matsuo in Naha City, an elderly woman stated that only old people and foreigners are interested in Uchinaaguchi. She further suggested that professors at the University are much better consultants on Uchinaaguchi than the speakers on the ground.

Discrimination against the Luchuan languages, by downgrading them to Japanese dialects, has had far-reaching effects: Even though many thousand still speak the Luchuan languages, most are no longer confident of their language skills. They furthermore are reluctant to speak their languages in public. Community language activities on Uchinaaguchi generally do not include 'ordinary speakers', such as taxi drivers or local traders. Language related activities are confined to selected groups of intellectuals, who focus on discussing Uchinaaguchi as a

cultural treasure, with strong elitist pretensions. Those still speaking the languages on a regular basis are not part of such activities. They are not even aware of the fact that they are the true speakers, the only ones who can actually safeguard the Luchuan languages.

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[i] Consider for instance the following letters to the editor of *Ryukyu shinpo* during the occupation period:

"Are we really Japanese?" (*Ryukyu shinpo* 29.7.1965)

"A rebuttal to 'Are we really Japanese?'" (*Ryukyu shinpo* 1.8.1965)

"Japan is not the motherland" (*Ryukyu shinpo* 24.1.1966)

"A rebuttal to 'Japan is not the motherland'" (*Ryukyu shinpo* 15.2.1966)