

## **LANGUAGE CONFLICT AND LANGUAGE RIGHTS: THE AINU, RYŪKYŪANS, AND KOREANS IN JAPAN**

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### **Introduction**

Despite (and perhaps because of) a long-maintained myth of the ethnic purity of Japanese citizenry, ethnic minorities in Japan have been forced to confront issues of language conflict and language rights. The Ainu, Ryūkyūan and Korean minorities each exemplify a distinct linguistic circumstance in this regard. The Ainu are an aboriginal people of northern Japan, who have had a language and culture imposed upon them through Japanese territorial expansion. By contrast, Koreans immigrants find themselves a linguistic minority in an adopted land. The Ryūkyūan situation, distinct from both, represents an intra-lingual (as opposed to inter-lingual) conflict, as Ryūkyūan is considered (by some) to be a variety of Japanese.

In what follows, a brief survey of the ethnic and political history of each group and the nature of the Ainu, Ryūkyūan, and Korean languages provide some historical background to the conflicts and a context for distinguishing the linguistic and paralinguistic properties of them. We then examine some of the linguistic and language-related human rights issues that have affected the three groups. Comparisons with the circumstances of Amerindians, Puerto Rican immigrants, and African-American English speakers in the United States afford some further insight into the Japanese situation. In making these comparisons, we find some very salient parallels, which suggest that particularism of the Japanese and American cases might be better understood as instances of more general patterns of inter- and intra-linguistic conflict.

### **The Origin of Japanese**

Before taking up the matter of linguistic minorities in Japan, it is instructive to situate Japanese linguistically in its region and to understand the nature of, and motivations for the promotion of, Standard Japanese over regional dialects.

There is a range of theories regarding the origin of Japanese, some of which are more plausible than others. However, there is no firm consensus regarding any single one of the more plausible theories. Theories connecting Japanese with North Asian languages include those placing Japanese with the Altaic or Ural-Altaic languages, those connecting Japanese with Korean (which many scholars place in the Altaic family), and theories connecting Japanese with Ryūkyūan. Other hypotheses relate Japanese with Southeast Asian languages—the Malayo-Polynesian, Austro-Asiatic, and Tibeto-Burman theories. And there are yet other, more recent hypotheses.

Several things are clear from discussions in Miller (1974), Shibatani (1990), and Holmberg (2010) that help explain the lack of consensus. First, the split of Japanese from its nearest linguistic relatives (such as perhaps Korean) took place much longer ago than did that of the Romance language descendants of Latin, which was only 1000–1500 years ago. This makes historical reconstruction of the Japanese language more difficult. Second, Japanese scholars have tended not to use scientific methods of linguistic reconstruction with particular rigor, thus making the results of many comparisons somewhat suspect. This may be in part due to a belief about the special nature of Japanese, in comparison with other languages. Miller (1974: 94–95) states that, for Japanese scholars, “foreign languages, Western languages, perhaps even Chinese, have genetic relationships (*shin'en kankei*) that can be and often are established by the scholarship of the comparative method, but that Japanese is, in this respect as in so many others, ‘unique,’ in that it has only a *keitō* [(family) lineage], which must, by terminological definition, remain forever obscure.” Finally, although some linguistic relationships (such as the overarching Altaic origins) are unsettled, some parts of this picture, such as the Japanese-Korean and Japanese-Ryūkyūan connections, are fairly secure.

However, proposals differ with respect to these relationships as well. For example, Robbeets (2005) considers Japanese and Korean to have developed from different subfamilies of the Macro-Tungusic branch of the Altaic family, while Japanese and Ryūkyūan are more closely related, being the sole members of the Japonic language group. On the other hand, Miller (1971, as reported in Shibatani 1990) takes Japanese, Korean, and Ryūkyūan to have developed from a common ancestral Proto-Korean-Japanese language, exclusive of other Tungusic languages. Shibatani (1990:101), for his part, does not accept Miller’s suggestion that “Middle Korean, Old Japanese, and Ryūkyūan [are] sisters on a par.” For him, “the

Japanese–Ryūkyūan connection is far more transparent than that between Japanese and Korean” (Shibatani 1990: 101). As such, Shibatani would likely agree with Robbeets on this matter over Miller, but would go further in claiming that Ryūkyūan is merely a “dialect (group) of Japanese.” This claim will be assessed further in the section on Ryūkyūan, but for now we take the position that Ryūkyūan and Japanese are closely related; Korean and Japanese are somewhat less closely related; and Ainu and Japanese are for the most part unrelated.

Turning to the issue of Standard Japanese and Japanese dialects, it is important to note, as Shibatani (1990: 185–186) does, that the geography of Japan (i.e., its numerous islands and mountainous interior) lends itself to a high degree of linguistic diversification, leading to a situation in which the various dialects of Japanese are mutually unintelligible. For example, as Shibatani says, “speakers [from] the southern island of Kyūshū would not be understood by the majority of the people on the main island of Honshū ...[and] northern dialect speakers from...Aomori and Akita would not be understood by the people in the metropolitan Tokyo area” (Shibatani 1990: 185).

This linguistic reality led to an effort by the Meiji government in Tokyo in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to attempt to impose a national standard variety (called *hyōjun-go*, or “Standard Language”) that would unify the nation linguistically. The enforcement of a national standard was historically imposed through the educational system (as described later on). Teaching the Tokyo dialect as the standard throughout Japan had the effect, Shibatani notes, of fostering feelings of inferiority among speakers of non-standard dialects. The enforcement could be, at times rather cruel, as when a *hōgen huda* (dialect tag) was hung around the neck of any student who used their home dialect in school. This policy and practice continued through the end of World War II, when the concept of *kyōtū-go* (common language) was introduced. This variety of Japanese (used by speakers of different dialects to communicate with each other) is much more malleable than “Standard/Tokyo Japanese,” possessing many of the features of the standard, but also “retains dialect traits, such as accentual features” (Shibatani 1990: 186). With this in mind, we take up the cases of Ainu, Ryūkyūan, and Korean separately.

## **The Ainu**

### ***Historical Background***

The origin of the Ainu is a somewhat obscure, though it has been claimed on the basis of DNA-type evidence that both the Ainu and the Ryūkyūans are descended from a group (the Jōmon) believed to have arrived in northern Japan/Hokkaido some 14,000 years ago, originating in southeast Asia (Hanihara 1991). The Ainu are indigenous to Japan's northern territories, including northern Honshu (possibly), Hokkaido, the Kuril Islands, and Sakhalin Island (the latter two areas having been lost to the Soviets following World War II).

Traditionally hunter-gatherers who lived in *kotan* (small villages) of people directly related by blood, the Ainu were animists who believed in spirits associated with natural phenomena (wind, fire, water), parts of nature (animals, plants, mountains), and material culture (boats, pots), and whose rituals included bear hunting, animal sacrifice, and tattooing the lips, hands, and arms of girls when they reached puberty.

Although there had been earlier contact, regular trade with the Japanese only began during the 1400s, with the establishment of small Japanese trading settlements in southern Hokkaido. The Japanese themselves considered the Ainu to be barbarians, and this led to an uneasy relationship from the start and to repeated efforts on the part of the Ainu to expel the Japanese from their lands. After a few centuries of sporadic conflict, including the last "pan-Ainu" uprising against the Japanese in 1669 (Shakushain's War), the territory essentially came under the control of the Japanese. Competition between the Japanese and Russians for control of Ainu lands officially ended in 1855 with the signing of the Treaty of Shimoda (*nichiro tsūkō jōyaku*), under which the Japanese gained sovereignty over Hokkaido. After this point, Japanese control of the island grew progressively tighter.

### ***Linguistic Background***

Despite various proposals attempting to establish a genetic relationship between Ainu and Japanese or Ainu and other languages (Batchelor 1905; Hattori 1964), it is widely accepted among linguists (Kindaichi 1937; Shibatani 1990) that Ainu belongs to no established language family. Although some superficial similarities between Ainu and Japanese exist, these are generally grammatical traits common to most languages having Subject-Object-Verb word order. Thus, the same traits are shared not only by Ainu and Japanese, but also other completely unrelated

languages such as Hindi, Tamil, Choctaw, and so on. Much more striking are their dissimilarities.

First, the sound systems of the two languages are distinct. Perhaps the most noticeable difference is the fact that, whereas Japanese has voiceless and voiced pairs of (certain) consonants, Ainu only has the voiceless member of each pair, so there is no /b, d, g, z/, as shown in the following chart:

**Table 1. Oral Obstruent Consonants in Japanese and Ainu Languages**

		<b>Bilabial</b>	<b>Alveolar</b>	<b>Velar</b>	<b>Glottal</b>
<b>Japanese</b>	Stop	p b	t d	k g	
	Fricative		s z		h
<b>Ainu</b>	Stop	p	t	k	ʔ
	Fricative		s		h

Second, Ainu grammatical inflections and case marking is quite distinct from Japanese. Unlike Japanese, Ainu verbs have no inflection for tense and aspect, and thus temporality is interpreted solely on the basis of context. Nouns are not marked to indicate the grammatical relations such as subject, object, or indirect object, whereas Japanese include postpositions for this purpose (i.e., *ga*, *o*, *ni*). Thus word order can be a crucial indicator of who is doing what to whom in a clause, as seen in (1). Japanese would have much freer word order, with subjects and objects signaled by *ga* and *o*, respectively.

- (1) a. Kamuy aynu rayke.                      b. Aynu kamuy rayke.  
       bear        person kill                      person bear kill  
       “The bear killed the man.”              “The man killed the bear.”

Additionally, Ainu first- and second-person subjects and objects are cross-referenced on the verb with prefixes. In contrast, Japanese has no such agreement system.

- (2) a. ku-i-kore                                      b. e-en-kore  
       1SING(ULAR)-2HON(ORIFIC)-give        2SING-1SING-give  
       “I give you (HON)”                        “You give me”

### *Language Rights Issues*

Language rights issues for the Ainu “officially” began in 1869 when the island of Ezochi was renamed Hokkaido by the newly formed Meiji government. Local administrative development systems were set up, and the Meiji government embarked on a policy of (forced) assimilation—a policy whose ultimate aim was to eradicate Ainu culture. Under this regime, the Ainu were systematically stripped of any Ainu identity and were “made” Japanese.

The official “registration” of the Ainu occurred in 1871, at which time the Ainu were designated “commoners,” and were forced to assume Japanese names (Irish 2009). Laws passed in and around this time were designed to prevent or curtail many Ainu traditions, including salmon fishing and deer hunting, the practice of burning a family’s house and moving elsewhere after the death of a family member, the tattooing of girls at puberty, and men wearing earrings. Also imposed at this time were many restrictions concerning the use of the Ainu language:

- **Naming:** The Ainu were forced to take Japanese names, and names in the public domain had to be Japanese.
- **Restrictions on public use:** The use of Ainu in public, including the government and the legal system, was prohibited.
- **Education:** Aside from naming, education in one’s native language is widely considered to be a fundamental language right. From the time of registration, Ainu children were forced to attend schools that were conducted solely in Japanese as use of Ainu in education was banned by law.

Thus, began the decline of the Ainu language. This was also a period of dramatic decline in the Ainu population. A government survey in 1807 estimated that there were more than 26,000 Ainu living in Hokkaido. By 1873, it was estimated that the population was roughly 16,000, and the Ainu made up only 14.6% of the population of the island (Siddle 1996). Thus, the Ainu had minority status after only a short period of time. Among the causes for the dramatic decline were the spread of diseases (e.g. smallpox, measles, and syphilis) brought by the colonists and the breakup of families due to forced labor (Walker 2001).

In the late 1870s, as part of the promulgation of the myth of Japanese ethnic unity, the Ainu were officially designated “former aborigines” and their land was expropriated by the government. An influx of ethnic Japanese continued apace, propelled in part by government offers of land to the Japanese colonists. Naturally, as the population of Japanese settlers from Honshu increased, the Ainu became increasingly marginalized. Linguistically, Ainu continued to decline through (1) the coercion of the government, (2) the belief among the Ainu that the use of Japanese language would make life better for their children, and (3) inter-marriage with Japanese settlers.

The next major event in the cultural and linguistic decline of the Ainu came in 1899 with the signing of the Hokkaido Former Aborigines Protection Act (*hokkaido kyūdojin hogohō*). At this time (possibly due to insecurity about its control over the northern territories), the Japanese government redoubled its efforts at assimilating the Ainu into Japanese society and eradicating Ainu culture. As part of the act, Ainu families were granted small plots of land, in order to transform them from hunters into (more easily managed) farmers. Much of the best farmland had already been claimed by Japanese settlers. In the end, most of the Ainu farmland reverted back to the government, as they themselves lacked the desire or the skills to be successful farmers.

The Regulations for the Education of Former Aboriginal Children, which reinforced the education repression of the Ainu, were established in 1901. Under this regime, Ainu children were compelled to attend (mostly) segregated schools, where the focus was on learning Japanese language skills, rather than science, math, or other subjects. They were thereby denied both the right to be educated in their native language as well as a decent education. So, despite the fact that over 90% of Ainu children attended school by 1910 (Ogawa 1997 cited in Ishikida 2005), most received a greatly inferior education, and were cut off from their heritage. As the Ainu continued their descent into poverty and disadvantage, the Ainu language itself continued its path toward near extinction.

The first organization devoted to Ainu issues was established immediately after the end of World War II. Beginning in 1946, the Ainu Association of Hokkaido focused its attention on pressing economic issues and attempted to increase wealth in Ainu communities.<sup>1</sup> There were more

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<sup>1</sup> The association was officially renamed the “Hokkaido Utari Association”

public works initiatives in the 1960s, but the Ainu themselves remained less well-educated and on the cultural and economic margins of Japanese society. For example, in 1972, barely over 40% of Ainu youth attended high school (Siddle 1996). Other statistics are equally bleak, although the economic status of the Ainu has reportedly improved in recent years.

During the 1960s and 1970s, a general awakening of indigenous human rights efforts worldwide spurred the Ainu and their supporters to increased activism, which led to a reawakening of the culture. Shigeru Kayano championed the effort to open the first Ainu nursery school in Nibutani (80% Ainu) in the early 1980s, where the Ainu language was taught to preschoolers. Under his leadership, a number of additional community-based Ainu language schools opened (Sjöberg 1993). Despite these efforts, the Ainu language has not been successfully revived, and may be beyond rescue. Various reports place the current number of speakers of the only remaining Ainu language (the Hokkaidō variety) at anywhere from 15 to about 100.

The Japanese government has only recently acknowledged the official existence of the Ainu as an ethnic minority. Only following the ratification of the U.N.-sponsored International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in 1979, and after international pressure and some domestic activism, did the government renounce its official claims of ethnic homogeneity for the region. But even then, official recognition of the Ainu as an ethnic minority did not occur until 1991. Starting in the mid-1980s, the Hokkaido Utari Association (with Kayano as its inspiration) started to agitate for the repeal of the 1899 act and the establishment of a new one.

Finally passed in 1997 was the Act on the Encouragement of Ainu Culture and the Diffusion and Enlightenment of Knowledge on Ainu Tradition (also referred to as the Ainu Culture Promotion Act). The Act included provisions for nondiscrimination, political activity, economic development (i.e., fishing, agriculture), and the formation of an advisory committee. But at the heart of the Act was the promotion and preservation of Ainu culture through teaching, research and other efforts (focusing on language as well as traditional arts, such as music, drama, oral tradition). At one point, there was an annual Ainu Oratorical Contest (1998-2004) in which students from the various language schools came together for Oral Literature and Oratory competitions, but this has been discontinued.

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in 1961 (<http://www.ainu-assn.or.jp/english/eabout04.html>).



So, in fact, few Ainu speak the Ainu language or follow the traditional way of life. Given this, the Ainu identity is likely to become a “symbolic ethnicity,” with Ainu culture and heritage being transmitted to future generations of the Ainu through schools, museums, and annual festivals (Ishikida 2005:24).

### **Comparisons**

The similarities between the histories of the Ainu and the American Indians in the United States are unmistakable. Both groups were subject to internal colonization: for the Ainu, the Wajin from the south, and for the Plains and Western Indians, American settlers from the east. Both were subject to forced assimilation policies. Just as the Dawes Act (1887) provided land to American Indians to encourage an agrarian livelihood, so the Hokkaido Former Aborigines Protection Act (*hokkaido kyūdojin hogohō*, 1899) gave land to every Ainu man for purposes of homesteading. Education played an important role in the assimilation policies. For the Ainu, the Regulations for the Education of Former Aboriginal Children (1901) ensured that Ainu children went to government-sanctioned schools where one of the primary foci was learning Japanese. In the United States, the Indian Boarding School movement of the late 1880s and early 1900s took children from their families to be educated, including “a thorough knowledge of the use of the English language” (Lamar 1886:4). Finally, just as the Ainu were registered under Japanese names (1871), so were the American Indian children given Western names when they entered school. In both cases, children who spoke in their native language were punished. The strategies of both the Japanese and U.S. governments, while not actually ensuring assimilation, did ensure the loss of native culture and the precipitous decline of the languages of the indigenous populations.

### **Ryūkyūan Languages/Dialects**

#### ***Historical Background***

We turn now from the extreme northern parts of Japan to the far flung reaches of its Ryūkyū Islands to the south. With a population of some 1.5 million and an area amounting to somewhat less than 2,000 square miles, the 100 islands of the Ryūkyū Island chain extend about 650 miles, from the southern main island of Kyūshū to within 75 miles of Taiwan. This is nearly half the north to south distance of Japan’s four main islands (i.e., from the northernmost tip of Hokkaido to the island of Kagoshima in Kyūshū). The physical location and range of these islands are as important

as their history to an understanding of their current status. If, as Shibatani maintains, the numerous islands and mountainous interior of Japan lends itself to a high degree of linguistic diversification such that Japanese speakers from Hokkaido would not understand their compatriots from Kyūshū, then one might expect much more linguistic diversification in an island chain strung out over 650 miles and isolated from the major Japanese islands.

The history of the island chain provides important insights into our understanding of the linguistic situation here. Ishikida (2005) suggests that the Ryūkyūans are (like the Ainu and the original inhabitants of the island of Kyūshū) descended from Jōmon hunters, gatherers, and fishermen, who had settled in the Japanese archipelago many centuries before the arrival of the agrarian Yayoi peoples, who immigrated from North Asia through Korea some 2,400 years ago.

Regardless of origins, it is clear that the Ryūkyūans were an autonomous nation from the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century right up until their incorporation into the Japanese nation-state at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The first recorded Ryūkyūan dynasty (the Shunten Dynasty) was founded in 1187, right about the same time as the Kamakura shogunate (which marks the end of the Heian classical period and the beginning of feudal Japan). The Ryūkyūan kingdom started attracting the (perhaps less than welcome) attention of its more powerful Chinese and Japanese neighbors beginning in 1372, when the Ryūkyūan King Satto began paying tribute to the first emperor of the Chinese Ming Dynasty.

At the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Japanese feudal rulers got into the act. Upset that the Ryūkyūans refused to provide conscripts for a Japanese invasion of Korea, and taking advantage of a succession struggle in the Ryūkyū kingdom, the Satsuma rulers in Kyūshū invaded and defeated the Ryūkyūans in 1609. Deciding that a life well taxed was preferable to a life cut short, the Ryūkyūans wound up paying double tribute (to China and to the Satsuma) for another century. Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as China was slipping irretrievably into the losers' column of the colonialist–colonized equation, Japan stepped up to claim the Ryūkyūs as a province, making them the Okinawa Prefecture of the Meiji state in 1879. China, having come out on the losing side of the Sino-Japanese War, finally renounced its claim to the islands in 1895.

Thus, from 1879 until its defeat in 1945, the Ryūkyūs were ruled directly by Japan. Following World War II, the islands were under a U.S. military government until 1950, and then ruled by an indigenous

government (though still subject to U.S. oversight) until 1972. In 1972, the Ryūkyū Islands were returned to Japan. Adding up the years, then, the Ryūkyū Islands have been an actual part of Japan for about one of the past eight centuries. This is a significant point in understanding the current context.

### *Linguistic Background*

In order to understand the linguistic situation in the Ryūkyū Islands, some discussion of the language(s) spoken there is in order. As noted earlier, there is a wide divergence of opinion on whether they are languages separate from Japanese, or “merely” dialects of Japanese. Miller (1971) claims that “Middle Korean, Old Japanese, and Ryūkyūan [are] sisters on a par,” which would surely make them distinct languages. Robbeets, while placing Korean at a further distance from Japanese than Ryūkyūan, clearly gauges Japanese and Ryūkyūan to be distinct languages. On the other side of the debate, Shibatani, along with many other Japanese scholars, would classify Ryūkyūan as a “dialect” of Japanese.

Shibatani (1990) contrasts the view held by Chamberlain in 1895 (and many Western linguists since then) that Ryūkyūan and Japanese are sister languages, with that proposed by Hattori (1976) – and other Japanese linguists – that they are dialects of a single language. Shibatani (1990:191) notes Chamberlain’s observation that “the relationship between Ryūkyūan and Japanese is something like that between Spanish and Italian or between French and Italian,” and then goes on to say that “unlike these Romance languages, the Ryūkyūan dialects are often mutually completely unintelligible among themselves, let alone to the speakers of any mainland dialect.” In support of Hattori’s position, though, Shibatani suggests that it is clear from linguistic similarities that Ryūkyūan is substantially more closely related to Japanese than is Korean.

At this juncture, it is worth pointing out that Shibatani’s assertion about the relative relationship of Korean and Ryūkyūan to Japanese quite misses the point on which Chamberlain and Hattori would disagree. The issue here is whether to consider Ryūkyūan languages to be dialects of Japanese or whether to see them as a family of related but distinct languages. For his part, Shibatani (1990:191) dismisses the issue: “Once a genetic relationship is established between two languages, it is a moot point whether to regard them as two languages or as two dialects of one language.” But it is not a moot point at all. Whether the Ryūkyūans have their own language and linguistic tradition, or whether they all speak some

rustic (and by popular implication, inferior) dialect of Japanese, has enormous implications for them and for their linguistic culture.

In most (at least Western) contexts, considering two varieties of a language to be dialects entails that they be mutually intelligible to some extent. This is apparent in the salient case of British and American English, whose speakers can converse each in their respective dialects with little difficulty, other than the peculiarities of lexical choice (e.g. British “lift” for American “elevator,” etc.). In Asia, the term “dialect” is often used to refer to pairs of mutually unintelligible languages—e.g. Shanghai and Beijing “dialects” of Chinese, which are in fact distinct Chinese languages—and at other times to refer to what Western linguistics would acknowledge as true varieties (i.e., dialects) of a single language.

With respect to the Ryūkyūan–Japanese situation, it is clear that Ryūkyūan and Japanese are mutually unintelligible, as are the various dialects of Ryūkyūan and the various dialects of Japanese proper. In assessing Ryūkyūan as a Japanese dialect, Chew (1976) asserts that “the Hirara dialect (of Ryūkyūan) is sufficiently close to Standard Japanese for its speakers to be able to create a good proportion of the standard vocabulary by applying sound changes to dialect words.” But what is this evidence of? One could make the same claim regarding Italian and Spanish, or about Russian and Bulgarian. Clearly such a metric is not really informative.

However “transparent” the relationship between Ryūkyūan and Japanese, it is nonetheless the case that “the Ryūkyūan stock split from the mainstream Japanese language at the latest around 6 A.D.” (Shibatani 1990:193). From an historical perspective, this would suggest a split at, or shortly after, the arrival of the agrarian Yayoi people to the Japan archipelago (i.e., around the time of the formation of a separate ethnic Japanese people). From a linguistic perspective, calling Ryūkyūan and Japanese dialects of the same language would be no different from calling English, German, and Icelandic dialects of the same language (whatever language that might be).<sup>2</sup> Thus, while it might be advantageous to Japan to consider Ryūkyūan languages as mere varieties (i.e., dialects) of Japanese,

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<sup>2</sup> “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” (Bairon, Brenzinger, and Heinrich 2009).

such an assessment does not carry much linguistic or historical weight (Shibatani's characterization of "moot points" notwithstanding).

Beginning with its 2009 edition, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* includes, alongside Ainu, the following Luchuan (Ryūkyūan) languages of Japan: Amami, Hachijō, Kunigami, Miyako, Okinawan, Yaeyama, and Yonaguni.<sup>3</sup> By classifying Ryūkyūan as a group of endangered languages, the UNESCO document thus affirms their status as autonomous languages, and as objects worthy of study and preservation.

Bairon, Brenzinger, and Heinrich (2009) note that the UNESCO classification serves as a challenge to "the long-standing misconception of a monolingual Japanese nation state that has its roots in the linguistic and colonizing policies of the Meiji period." It is also notable that Japanese society laid claim to the Ryūkyūan people and language as a part of Japan and the Japanese language, and simultaneously categorized them and their language as inferior and contemptible. According to Barclay (2006:120), the Ryūkyūan people are deemed by main island Japanese to be "backward, lazy, inefficient, prone to insanity, irrational and unhygienic...Japanese, in contrast, [are] modern, hardworking, efficient, sane, rational, and clean."

#### ***Language Rights Issues***

One of the central issues of concern, as noted, is the preservation of the Ryūkyūan languages. While there was some acknowledgement of local Ryūkyūan culture and language at the outset of Japanese de facto control over the territory in 1872, this did not last long. From the time of its administrative incorporation into Japan in 1879, there was a deliberate and focused effort on making the Ryūkyūans Japanese. This effort primarily took the form of disseminating the (standard) Japanese language through the public educational system.

The motivations for this are, to some degree, understandable. The Ryūkyū Islands stand at the southwestern extremity of the Japan Archipelago and extend out into the vulnerable space between Japan and its larger Asian neighbor, China, and the pressure to incorporate this space into

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<sup>3</sup> The interactive atlas is found here: Moseley, Christopher (ed.). 2010. *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*, 3rd ed. Paris, UNESCO Publishing. Online version: (<http://www.unesco.org/culture/en/endangeredlanguages/atlas>).

the Japanese nation took on greater urgency after the 1895 Sino-Japanese War. It was in this same year that Japan occupied both Taiwan and Korea, making the Ryūkyūans the most closely related peoples in Japan's recently acquired territories. In this context, and given the mutual unintelligibility of Japanese dialects to begin with, it is not a surprise that the Ryūkyū Islands became an extension of the Ministry of Education efforts to standardize Japanese throughout the empire. As far as the policy makers were concerned, Ryūkyūan languages appeared to be nothing more than dialects of Japanese, and were consequently treated as such.

What this meant for the Ryūkyū islanders, at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was that “efforts to spread Japanese increasingly employed coercive measures” (Heinrich 2005). In 1907, with the passage of the Ordinance to Regulate Dialects (*hōgen torishimari-rei*), children were now prohibited from speaking their native Ryūkyūan languages in school. As Japan's imperial ambitions increased, so did the pressure on Ryūkyū islanders to conform to the national(istic) model of Japanese language and culture. In 1931, Japan invaded and occupied Manchuria (China's northeasternmost territory), and on the island of Okinawa established the Movement for Enforcement of the Normal Language (*fūtsūgo reikō undō*). Under this movement, debate societies were established to promote the use of Japanese. At these gatherings, “speaking a Ryūkyūan language...was considered an unpatriotic act, and children taking part in debate circles risked being penalized if they failed to speak Japanese” (Heinrich 2004).

While Japan lurched toward the expansion of military conflict throughout East Asia and the Pacific in the mid-1930s, there was an effort throughout the nation to promote loyalty, patriotism, and national unity. In this milieu, “active measures to suppress Ryūkyūan increased...[and] speaking Ryūkyūan in the private domain came to be seen as an obstacle to the spread of Standard Japanese” (Heinrich 2004:158). This period saw a marked increase in the use of the infamous *hōgen huda* (dialect tag) which was hung around the neck of any student who used their home dialect in school. As Heinrich reports, “other punishments included assignment of unpopular duties such as cleaning up after school lessons” (Heinrich 2004:159). Nishimura (2001:176) reports that, at one school, children had to sing “using dialect is the enemy of the country” (*hōgen tsukau wa kuni no kateki*) during morning assemblies. Tanaka (2001:12) reports that when he was at school, “there was a clothes-line in the classroom on which colored paper in the shape of laundry was hung. If a student spoke

Ryūkyūan, the expression used was written on a paper and symbolically cleansed.”

By 1939, the suppression of Ryūkyūan had been extended well beyond the classroom. A law was passed requiring the use of Standard Japanese in all government offices and institutions. Customers who used Ryūkyūan in these places would be denied service and any employees who spoke Ryūkyūan were fined. As the war progressed towards its inevitable catastrophe, the situation only got worse for the Ryūkyūans. Heinrich characterizes the attitude toward Ryūkyūan as “hysterical.” By the time of the Battle of Okinawa in 1945, “the army gave a command that anyone found using Ryūkyūan was to be considered a spy; cases were reported in which this order was carried out and people speaking Ryūkyūan were shot or stabbed to death” (Nakamatsu 1996: 58; Oyafuso 1986: 38).

As pointed out by Heinrich (2004:162), “language ideology is always also ideology about something other than language.” Under the ideological sway of a Standard Japanese (national language) movement, Ryūkyūan languages have been measured (along with true Japanese language dialects) against the “correct” national standard. Under the mistaken assumption that Ryūkyūan is a variety of Japanese, it has “stood out as the region in which (perceived) embarrassing language behaviour was most pronounced” (Heinrich 2005).

After the end of the World War II, there were attempts on the part of the American occupiers (in concert with local Ryūkyūan activists and scholars) to promote the distinct culture and language of the Ryūkyūan Islands. However, resentment of U.S. occupation served to enhance Ryūkyūan islanders’ affinity with Japan, and to cause them to agitate for reunification. Since 1972, the incursion of Standard Japanese into all forms of communication (public and private) and the diminution of Ryūkyūan languages has proceeded unrelentingly, to the point that the entire group of the Ryūkyūan languages is about to disappear.

While the UNESCO recognition is long overdue and welcome, it is unclear whether it has perhaps come about too late to effect any meaningful preservation of Ryūkyūan languages and culture. There is some reason to be mildly optimistic though. As Heinrich 2005 reports, the establishment of a Society for Spreading Okinawan (*uchinaguchi fukyū kyōgikai*) has begun to exert a positive influence, through the establishment of dialect classes in public schools and the introduction of a standard orthography for the language. A recent “dialect boom” throughout Japan may also have the effect of making Ryūkyūan languages more fashionable as well.

### *Comparisons*

While Ryūkyūan languages are indeed distinct from Japanese and do not fall into the category of dialects, similarities of Japanese attitudes towards them and American attitudes towards non-standard varieties of American English, more notably African-American English (AAE) are striking. Pullum (1997:321) assesses the “Ebonics” controversy of 15 years ago. In this controversy, the nation was scandalized by a proposal by the “Oakland Unified School District in California [on December 18, 1996]...to recognize the native tongue of most of its (African-American) pupils as a language.” While all linguists agree that AAE is a dialect of American English, the controversy was more about what this variety represented than its linguistic status. AAE, Pullum says, is “described as if it were English with mistakes and omissions.... commentators clarified little except the deep hostility and contempt whites feel for the way blacks speak (‘the patois of America’s meanest streets,’ columnist George Will called it, as if AAE could only be spoken in slums), and the deep shame felt by Americans of African descent for speaking that way (a *Los Angeles Times* column by Eldridge Cleaver, a former Black Panther party official, compared the official acknowledgement of AAE with condoning cannibalism)” (Pullum 1997:321).

However, as Pullum suggests, most Americans do not realize that AAE is not merely “bad English.” But as has been shown by numerous linguists, AAE is the same as any other human language, having a unique grammar and pronunciation rules (Bailey et al. 1998). “There is no more reason for calling it bad standard English,” Pullum says, “than there is for dismissing western dialects of English as bad eastern speech, or the reverse” (Pullum 1997:321). The fallacies evident from the Ebonics controversy are reflected in attitudes accompanying some of the local resistance to a revival of Ryūkyūan languages. Heinrich (2005) reports the following comment in a letter to the editor of the *Okinawa Times* from December 3, 2004. The letter writer, a government official opposed to a Ryūkyūan language revival or having these languages taught in the schools, wrote:

I have come across the misunderstanding that the Okinawa dialects are believed to constitute language systems of their own because terms such as Okinawan or island language and the like exist. As a matter of fact, they are merely instances of corrupt accents and Old



Japanese words which have not vanished but continue to be used in Okinawa....Although there have recently been voices calling for teaching the dialects as languages to children, such a practice would be dreadful. What is the idea of teaching corrupt accents? If pupils are not taught to speak proper Japanese, they will face humiliation when grown up because of the language barrier.

The author of this letter has many like-minded allies in the United States, whose attitudes toward Standard American English are equally unenlightened and linguistically flawed. Educating individuals such as this is no easy task, and one that must be undertaken across linguistic borders.

### **Korean Minority Language Speakers**

#### ***Historical Background***

Contact between the Korean peninsula and the Japan archipelago most likely dates back several thousand years. The earliest verifiable contact would have been some 2,400 years ago when agrarian Yayoi people crossed from Korea, bringing with them rice cultivation. Several hundred years later, in the 6th century C.E., the Korean peninsula served as the conduit for the introduction of Buddhism into Japan. From a linguistic perspective, this contact brought Chinese Buddhist texts and the introduction of the Chinese orthographic system to Japan.

A thousand or so years later, Japan (under Hideyoshi) attempted to invade and subjugate Korea. While the invasions ultimately failed, and Japan and Korea returned to a normal regime of trade for the next two centuries, Hideyoshi's invasions—with the explicit aim of extending Japanese military supremacy far out beyond the archipelago—presaged developments three centuries later. In the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Japan (taking its cues from European imperial powers) began to assert itself beyond the main islands, as we noted vis-à-vis the Ryūkyūs. Around this same time (1876), Japan, taking advantage of some Korean internal instability, forced an unequal trading treaty (Japan-Korea Treaty of Amity/*nitchō-shūkōjōki*) upon the Korean Empire. Following this, successive Japanese victories in the Sino-Japanese War of 1895 and the Russo-Japanese War of 1905 left Japan in a position to exert complete control over the Korean peninsula, and annex it officially in 1910.

According to Ishikida (2005), the incorporation of Korea into the Japanese Empire at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century led, inevitably, to the

transmission of Japanese culture and language to Korea and to the movement of population between the two (with Japanese military, administrators and teachers going in one direction, and Korean laborers going in the other). On the Korean side of the Japan Sea, schools were established to teach “Japanese language and culture, and to instill loyalty to the Japanese emperor” (Ishikida 2005:50). This intensified in the 1930s in the run-up to World War II, with policies designed to instill the unity of Korea and Japan (*naissen ittai*), declarations of loyalty to the Emperor, and the adoption of Japanese names. Koreans migrated in great numbers to Japan, to work in factories, construction, and mining. By the start of World War II, there were some 700,000 Japanese living in Korea and about 1.2 million Koreans living in Japan. By the end of the war, due in part to forced conscription of Korean laborers to help the war effort, the Korean population of Japan was slightly under 2 million (Ishikida 2005) out of a total population of 72 million (about 3%). Half of this number (about 1 million) returned to Korea immediately after the end of the war, with a subsequent decline to about 600,000 by 1948. This number has remained rather stable in the years since then. Most Korean residents live in the Kansai area (Osaka, Kyoto, and Hyōgo Prefectures) and Tokyo metropolitan areas such as Tokyo and Kanagawa Prefectures.

Following World War II, the General Headquarters of the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (GHQ) deemed as “Japanese nationals” any Koreans who refused to be repatriated to Korea, although for the Japanese, these individuals were considered “resident aliens.” The outbreak of the Korean War and the resulting division of Korea made the situation for these Korean residents of Japan far more complicated. For one thing, as Ishikida notes, many of them identified with the North Korean government and politics, even though they had come originally from South Korea.

### **Language Rights Issues**

One of the most difficult issues for Koreans in Japan has been, and remains, the preservation of their language and culture. Because the two largest Korean associations in Japan (the Chōren and the Minsei) were communist-dominated, they were dissolved in 1949 upon the outbreak of the Korean conflict and this led to cultural and educational deficits that would be difficult to overcome. Up until the outbreak of hostilities in Korea, the two associations had established nearly 600 elementary schools, six middle schools, ten “youth schools,” and two vocational schools, serving over 50,000 students. The dissolution of the supporting Korean

associations, coupled with an order from the GHQ that Korean language could only be taught in extracurricular classes, resulted in a sharp fall in the number of Korean children receiving ethnic education. Only 20,000 continued their ethnic and language training in private Korean schools, while some 40,000 transferred to Japanese schools or dropped out (Lee 1999:139–145, as cited in Ishikida 2005).

The 1950-1960s saw a temporary recovery in the area of Korean ethnic education, with the establishment of the Chongryun (the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan), affiliated with North Korea. By 1966, “there were more than 140 schools with 14 branch schools, 30 ethnic classes, 208 afternoon and night classes, with a total of 40,000 students” (Ishikida 2005, Lee 1999:150). Over the next 40 years though, the number of students in these schools declined (by 2003) to just over 11,000, with the decreasing enrollments putting further pressure on the schools (as they are private and self-supporting).

One of the ongoing problems with Korean heritage education concerns the official Ministry of Education policies that impede it. According to Hatori (2005), these ethnic schools do not have official status. Japanese educational policy provides free public education, but only if the medium of instruction is Japanese. This means, among other things, that “students from Korean national schools are prevented from receiving the same treatment as those of Japanese schools in terms of candidacy for university entrance examinations; and Korean schools do not benefit from Government subsidies and tax exemptions” (Hatori 2005:48). Since Korean language and culture is not taught in public schools, and since Korean heritage schools must therefore be private, there are strong economic and educational disincentives for ethnic Koreans to attend such schools. This had led, naturally, to a decline in enrollments in these schools, and to a gradual loss of ethnic identity, cultural knowledge, and linguistic aptitude among younger Korean-Japanese. It is noted (Hatori 2005, Ishikida 2005) that the overwhelming majority of ethnically Korean youth use Japanese names “rather than their given Korean ones” in order to avoid being labeled as Korean.

There is, however, some indication that things are in fact changing for the better. Beginning in 2004, the Japanese Ministry of Education began to allow colleges and universities to independently assess the academic credentials of their applicants, and in 2005, revised the examination that high school students take to enter college, such that graduates from Korean ethnic schools now have the same status vis-à-vis the exam as do graduates

of Japanese public high schools. It is also the case that Japanese youth sports associations have begun to allow Korean ethnic schools to participate in intermural sports competitions. Whether this will change the trend, or whether it is too little, too late, remains to be seen. But it is clear that these changes are in the right direction.

### *Comparisons*

Problems affecting Korean residents of Japan, including the domain of language and language rights, are effectively a subset of the problems affecting any non-native ethnic group in Japan. As a 2008 U.S. Department of State report states:

Despite legal safeguards against discrimination, the country's large populations of Korean, Chinese, Brazilian, and Filipino permanent residents—many of whom were born, raised, and educated in Japan—were subject to various forms of deeply entrenched societal discrimination, including restricted access to housing, education, and employment opportunities.<sup>4</sup>

That Korean residents of Japan have these problems, after several generations of residence, is quite remarkable, although not unthinkable. One only has to consider the status of Hispanic citizens of the United States. In the case of Puerto Rico, for example, we find a very useful comparison. Puerto Rico was conquered by the United States in a war with Spain in 1898, right around the same time that Japan was incorporating Korea. Unlike Korea, Puerto Rico remains a U.S. territory to this day, but much like the Korean residents of Japan, Puerto Rican-Americans (who are in fact U.S. citizens) are also subject to “various forms of deeply entrenched societal discrimination, including restricted access to housing, education, and employment opportunities.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> United States State Department, “2008 Country Reports on Human Rights: Japan,” Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (accessed November 2010, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2008/eap/119041.htm>).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Much of this discrimination, like that against Koreans in Japan, finds its expression through resistance to culture and obstacles to the use of language. Also, while there are many areas in which Puerto Rican citizens have full access to Spanish language services, their need for such services is still marked as an immigrant problem, even though they are clearly not immigrants in any sense of the term.

### **Conclusion**

From the preceding discussion, it is apparent that language is one of the most salient markers (if not the most salient marker) of cultural identity, and in the course of inter-group conflict, language is often (and predictably) used as a tool for the domination of one group over another. The policies of the Japanese government have generally tended towards the absorption of other groups, in an apparent attempt to foster the notion of Japanese ethnic purity. Yet, the specific manner in which official Japanese policy has interacted with ethnic groups can be distinguished by the status of each group—be they aboriginal, an intra-ethnic minority, or an immigrant minority.

For the Ainu, being an aboriginal people meant that the very existence of their ethnicity and culture was antithetical to the Japanese notions of manifest destiny and their claim to being the first civilization on the islands. This was handled in two ways, both of which are reminiscent of white European-Americans' stance toward Amerindian tribes. First of all, the aboriginals were deemed to be "uncivilized" or "savages." Thus, while they might be "earlier" inhabitants of the land, they did not constitute an "earlier civilization." Secondly, they were remade into Japanese (or in the North American case, into Americans), by replacing their language (and other cultural identifiers) with that of the dominant civilization.

The Ryūkyūan case is one involving (for the Japanese, at least) an intra-ethnic minority. In this regard, the Japanese imposed the same regionally dictated chauvinist solution as was promulgated for all "dialect" speaking sub-groups. To promote national unity, one variety of Japanese would have to be officially favored, and be esteemed over all others. In this model, the Ryūkyūans were simply deemed to speak a different dialect of Japanese, but one that was "clearly" inferior to all the others. In this regard, as we have noted, the American attitude towards African-American English is worthy of comparison (in that many Americans regard African-American vernacular as the worst of the non-standard varieties).

The Korean case, involving what is clearly acknowledged to be a distinct national group, is somewhat different from these other two. Complete eradication and absorption is not an option (as with the Ainu), since the Korean nation remains a distinct national entity, irrespective of the conditions of Koreans in Japan proper. Also, while it might have once been imaginable during Japan's imperialistic heyday, the idea that Koreans would be absorbed into Japan and their language and culture replaced by Japanese, ceased to be a possibility after 1945. The Japanese treatment of Koreans and their language since then is thus very similar to American treatment of Spanish-speaking immigrants. They are acknowledged, but also deemed to be "alien" and kept from positions of power and influence through the diminution of, and constraints upon, their language and culture.

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