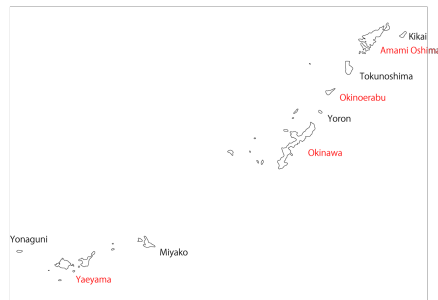


Effects of Gender on Language Revitalization & Documentation in the Ryukyus

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Ryukyu Islands



Objectives

Drawing from our experiences as female researchers in four distinct Ryukyuan communities (Amami, Okinoerabu, Okinawa and Yaeyama), we will explore the relationship between gender roles and indigenous language revitalization/documentation in the Ryukyuan context.

Both the researcher and the speakers' gender are significant when examining gender dynamics, so we will aim to address both of these dynamics. As researchers, we need to understand the gender roles, ideologies, and values, and we should listen to these women and use our power to further their agendas, while being cautious to not disrupt the community ecosystems.

Our aim is to highlight some issues in Ryukyuan language work connected to gender in order to open a dialogue and increase awareness and sensitivity on the subject.

Besides our own experiences, we collected survey and interview responses from 7 Ryukyuan women across the Ryukyuan archipelago.

This poster will act as a small case study and will highlight some issues that researchers should be aware of in the Ryukyus, and give some suggestions for moving forward, pertaining to both the gender of the researcher and the gender dynamics in the Ryukyuan communities. We will not only share our experiences and speculate how gender influences language work, but also advocate the need to listen to women so that their voices may continue to be heard, and not be silenced. We hope that by drawing attention to these issues, we can improve collaborative documentation and revitalization work in the Ryukyus and encourage other researchers and communities to examine these issues in their own contexts.

Consultants:

A-san (Amami-Oshima, female, aged 60s)
B-san (Amami-Oshima, female, aged 60s)
T-san (Okinoerabu, female, aged 60s)
O1-san (Okinawa, female, aged late 30s)
O2-san (Okinawa, female, aged late 20s)
K-san (Yaeyama, female, aged 40s)
S-san (Yaeyama, female, aged 20s)

1. Gender & Ryukyuan Societies

- Karimata (2014: 7) analyses proverbs of the Ryukyus, noting roles of women have been considered as those of bearing children, and being inside house. For example, one proverb reads: みどうむま七(なな)罰(ばつ)被(かう)ういどう生(う)まりず (translated: women have seven punishments from birth). Ryukyuan women may be the community members most interested in language revitalization and research, but because of their lower social status, they might be unable to take a strong position in these activities, and defer to the men in the community, even if the men are less involved in the language activities otherwise.
- “Anything to do with Buddhist altar is tended by men while Ryukyuan animistic rituals such as *Hinukan* prayers are led by women” (Zlazli and O1-san).
- Several roles specifically for women in Ryukyuan societies and women often have specific cultural knowledge: “Female ritual specialists, divine priestesses (*Kaminchu*) (Wacker, 2003), played a central role from state and community rituals to private psychotherapeutic counselling, and both men and women were under her authority” (Zlazli and O1-san).
- “Ryukyuan communities have developed around sacred groves (*Utaki*) or springs (*kaal-gaa*), and divine priestesses observe rituals at shrines (*Kami Asagi*) near there to ask for Gods’ protection. We want tourists to understand and respect their value for us.” (Zlazli, O1-san and O2-san)
- Women are often delegated to supporting roles only / “take a backseat role”
- “It is cheeky for women to give opinions, say the right answer, and refute in public (i.e. leaving the men behind). Women may avoid giving their own opinion to avoid being perceived like this” (A-san)
- “In the island, a “good wife” is one who supports her man” (T-san)
- “In the municipal office, men are promoted first. Women are regarded as an appendage of their husbands” (T-san)
- “In Okinoerabu Ryukyuan, there is a saying, 女(をうなく)ぬむんぬ “*wunagu=nu mun=nu*, meaning, “even though you are a woman”. For example, when a woman had a child and was still working, she was told “*wunagu=nu mun=nu*”. It means “women shouldn’t do that!”” (T-san)
- Gender may affect speakers’ language ideologies, e.g. women may be reluctant to use local languages because they consider them “crude”, “rough” and/or “unladylike”, e.g. “females potentially have fear in speaking the Yaeyaman language” (S-san). She feels sometimes afraid to keep doing this work because she has heard of gender differences related to the language of Yaeyama. (Hammine)
- In this way, societal expectations for women bar women from their local heritage languages. If language prestige increased, perhaps this would change.

2. Gender & Linguistic Research

Women are more likely to choose “higher-status” varieties:

- Intergenerational transmission is carried out in the home, and usually falls to mothers (Sallabank, 2013). Sallabank (2013) notes men often favor the minority language for its ‘macho’ connotations and traditional, even anti-social, activities undertaken in it.
- Gal (1979:167) identifies the preference of women to choose to speak German compared to men, ‘this greater rejection of Hungarian by young women can be seen as the linguistic expression of their rejection of peasant life.

Women rejecting the majority language:

- Aikio (1992:58) found that in contrast to many traditional societies, the status of women in Reindeer Sámi society was high, which led Sámi women to reject the majority language.
- Hoffman (2006:163) found that an ideal ‘woman’ in a Tashelhit language community works hard, speaks Tashelhit, spends frugally, and values the homeland over other places, although “some women do emigrate, work in factories, or renounce Tashelhit for Arabic”.

Gender affects researcher’s access

- “At celebrations, men sit on the top seat and women sit separately from men. Women stay in the kitchen for cooking and clean up after the men leave.” (T-san)
- “There is a feeling that women are not allowed to be in front of men” (T-san). So sometimes women don’t answer researcher’s questions in front of their husbands. They try to give priority to their husbands speaking. (Yokoyama)
- Women without families or children are not often included community language activities, and it seems they are silenced more than those who have families. (Hammine and Yokoyama)

Cultural considerations regarding gender (e.g. if researcher defies Ryukyuan gender roles, it may make speakers uncomfortable- need to handle delicately:

- “I think there are a lot of women who are willing to join language revitalization, but they are sometimes controlled by their husbands” (T-san)
- “Men may feel lonely when they are not relied upon, so when you want to ask someone’s wife for help, you can also say, “I would like to ask your wife to help me with this, but please cooperate with me together. If you ask their husbands for help and support, they will be happy to do so.” (T-san)
- Currently, the position of “chief” is usually held by men. But in the island, it is important to “establish a precedent”. If you set up a female leader in a region, it will be easier for other regions to follow it.” (T-san)
- “It would be nice if we could engage with various social activities more flexibly based on our individual qualities rather than a binary gender assignment to a specific social role.” (Zlazli, O1-san and O2-san)
- We can use language work to raise women’s status and empower women: “The language revitalization activities were very good. It may raise the status of women a little. They know a lot of stories, are good at talking with elders and teaching children.” (T-san)

3. Suggestions & Conclusions

- Though women may be the primary vehicles for transmission, and in this way carry primary responsibility for the state of an endangered language, they are not necessarily granted equivalent authority over these languages or their programming. (Meek, 2014: 550).
- Language revitalization could be a site for emancipation of women, in a sense that it could transform traditional gender roles. (T-san and Hammine)
- Language documentation/revitalization research needs to create a space for women “both to reinforce traditional gender roles and create space for the exploration of new gendered identities” (Ashlers, 2012:260)
- This study concludes that through language revitalization activities, women also aim at transmitting traditional gender roles of Ryukyuan communities such as ‘mother’ and ‘wife’ (Ishihara, 2014). This example suggests women play an important role in leading language revitalization activities in the Ryukyus. This corresponds to some studies in other contexts of endangered languages, which find women showing more positive attitudes towards the minority language (e.g. Aikio, 1992; Baker, 1992).

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