

***Paving ways to documenting an invisible  
linguistic minority in Japan:  
The case of Ikema***

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# The Ikema Project

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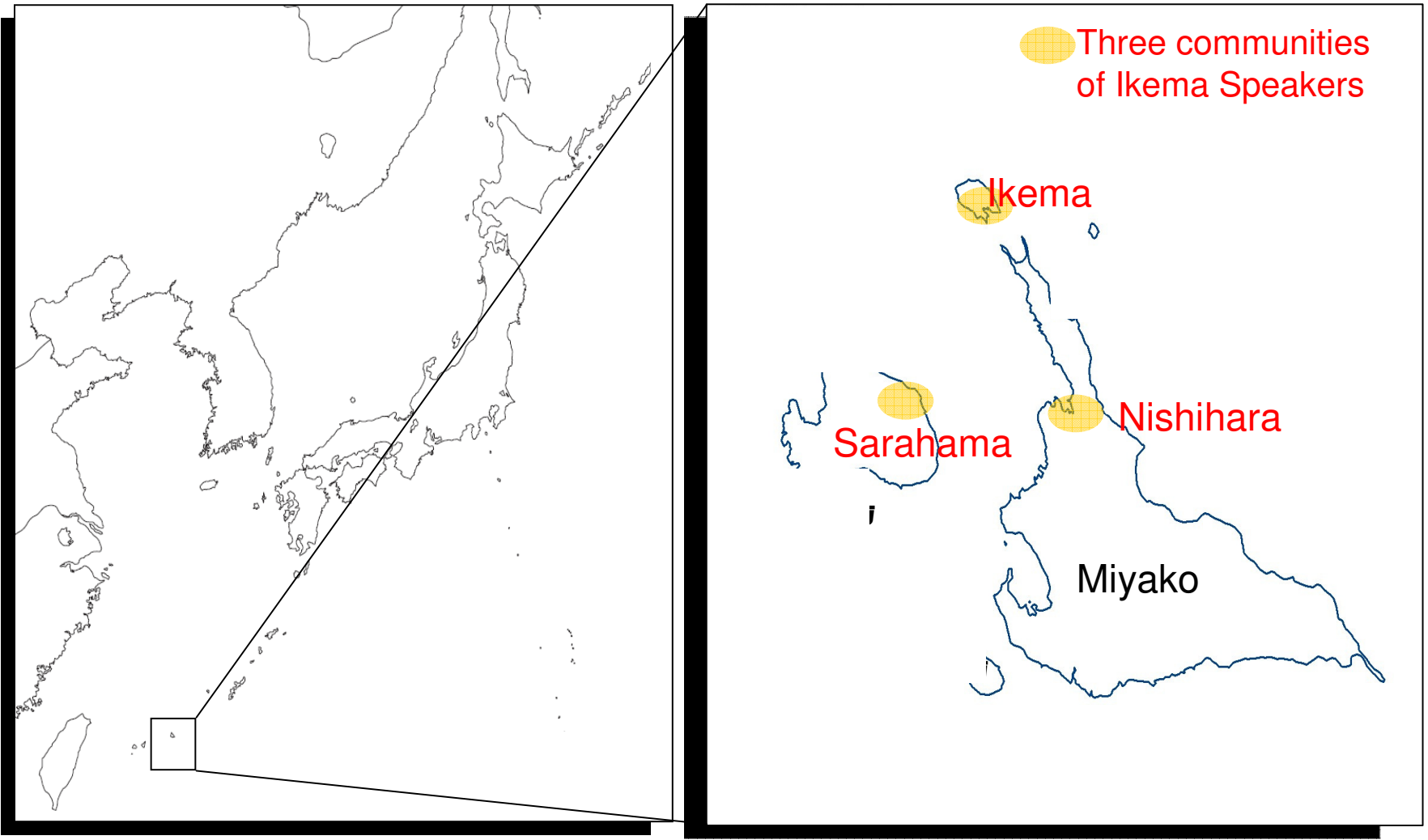
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Endangered Language Fund, Japan Foundation, U of Alberta grant

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Stanford



Courtesy: Yuka Hayashi

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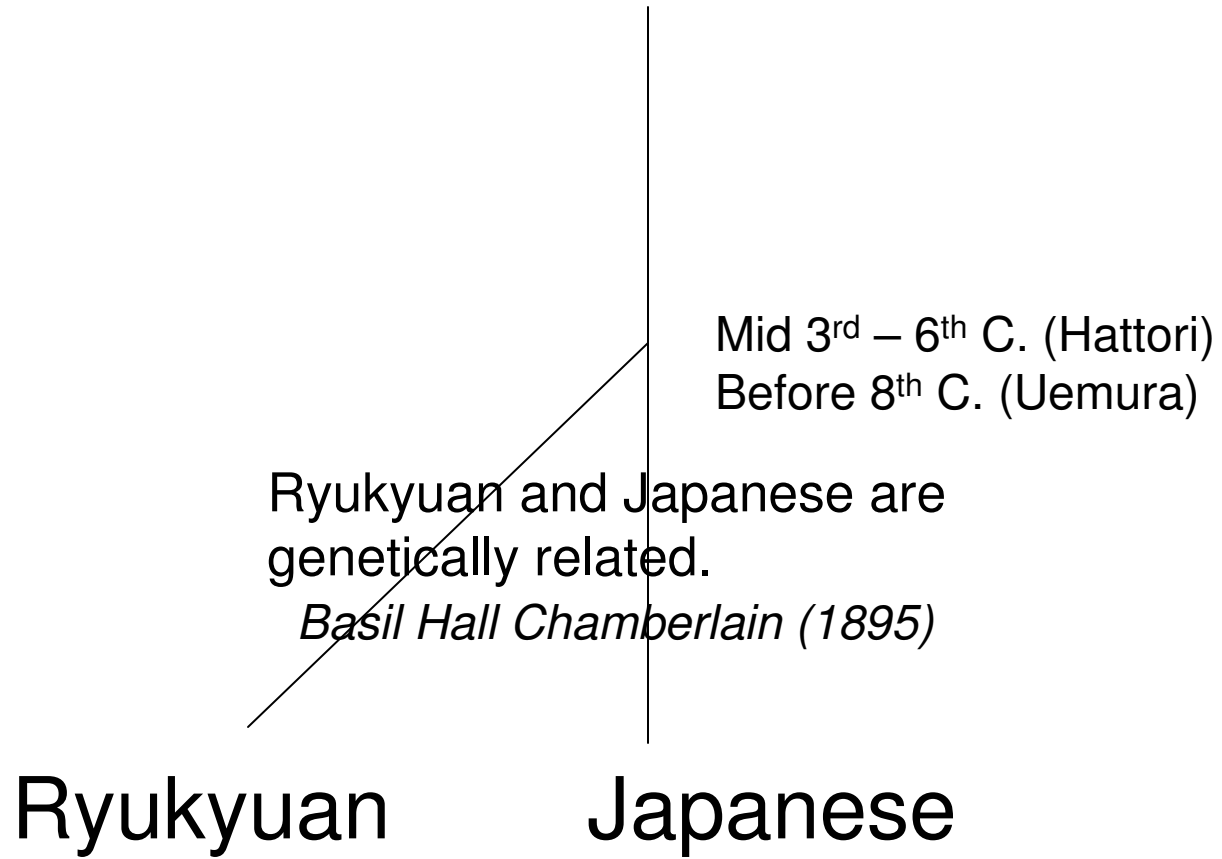
- 1) Why is Ikema (or Ryukyuan in general) an invisible linguistic minority?
- 2) What is the level of endangerment of Ikema?
- 3) What can we do as linguists to participate in the effort of local communities to preserve their culture and language?

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# History of language situation in Okinawa

Period I (before 1879) Independent Ryukyu Kingdom	Okinawan monolingualism
Period II (1879-1895) Japanese Sovereignty	Breakdown of monolingualism (Top-down standardization)
Period III (1895-1937) Japanese Sovereignty	Bilingualism (Bottom-up standardization)
Period IV (1937-1945) Japanese Sovereignty	Language shift (Accelerated standardization)
Period V (1945-1972) U.S. occupation	Decline of Okinawan
Period VI (1972-Present) Japanese Sovereignty	Revival of Okinawan



# Ryukyuan as a language

- historical depth and geographical isolation
- the language of Ryukyu Kingdom
- existence of written texts based on Japanese and Chinese writing systems
- existence of written literature (Omoro Soshi, late 15<sup>th</sup> - early 16<sup>th</sup> c.)



# Ryukyuan as a dialect

- (1) Government used this view to claim territorial ownership of Okinawa (denial of an independent Kingdom)

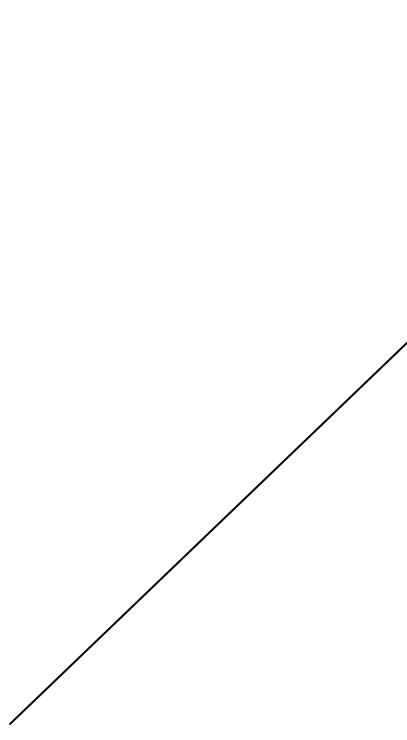
# Ryukyuan as a dialect

(2) Okinawans used this view to claim their ethnic affiliation to Japanese.

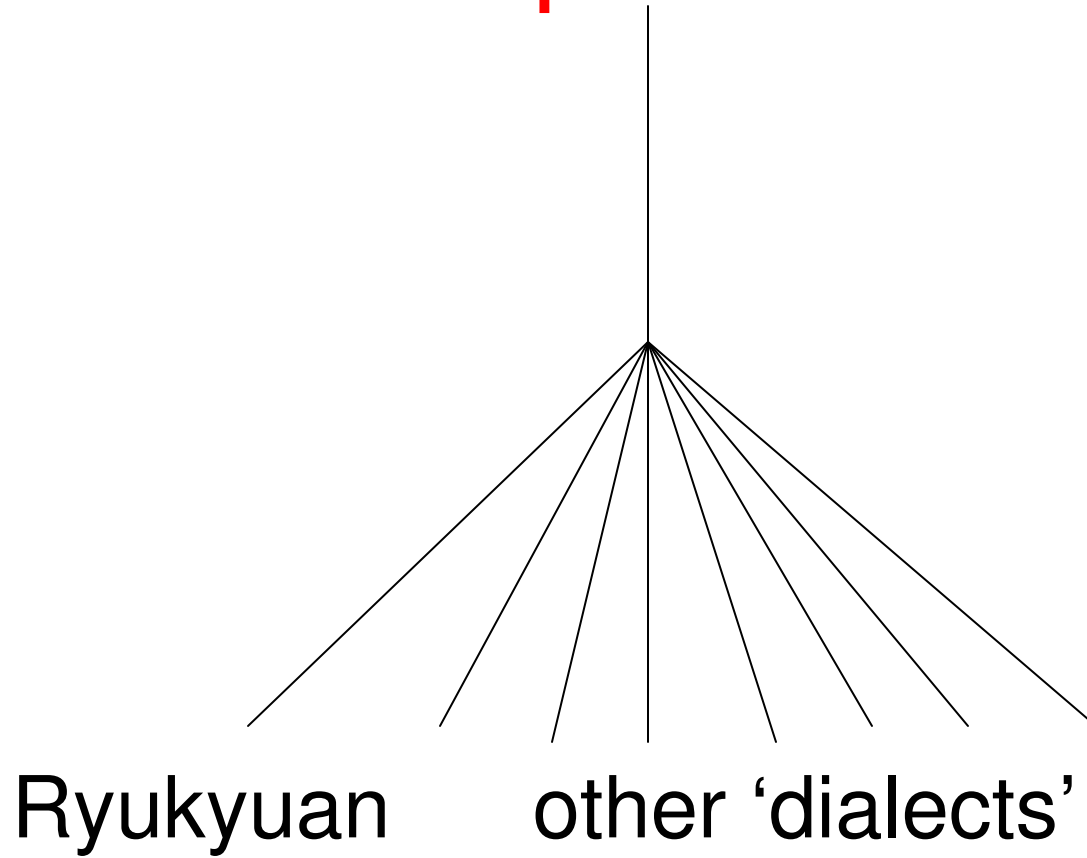
- Nationalism (Sino-Japanese war; Return to Japan after US occupation)
- Desire for assimilation (political, economic, emotional)
- To conquer discrimination
- To avoid punishment

Ryukyuan

Japanese



Japanese



- Lack of policy for bilingualism
- Strong assimilation policy
- Creation of monoethnic-monolingual myth
- During this process, Ryukyuan (and specially smaller varieties like Ikema) **has become invisible** in Japan (cf. the Philippines).

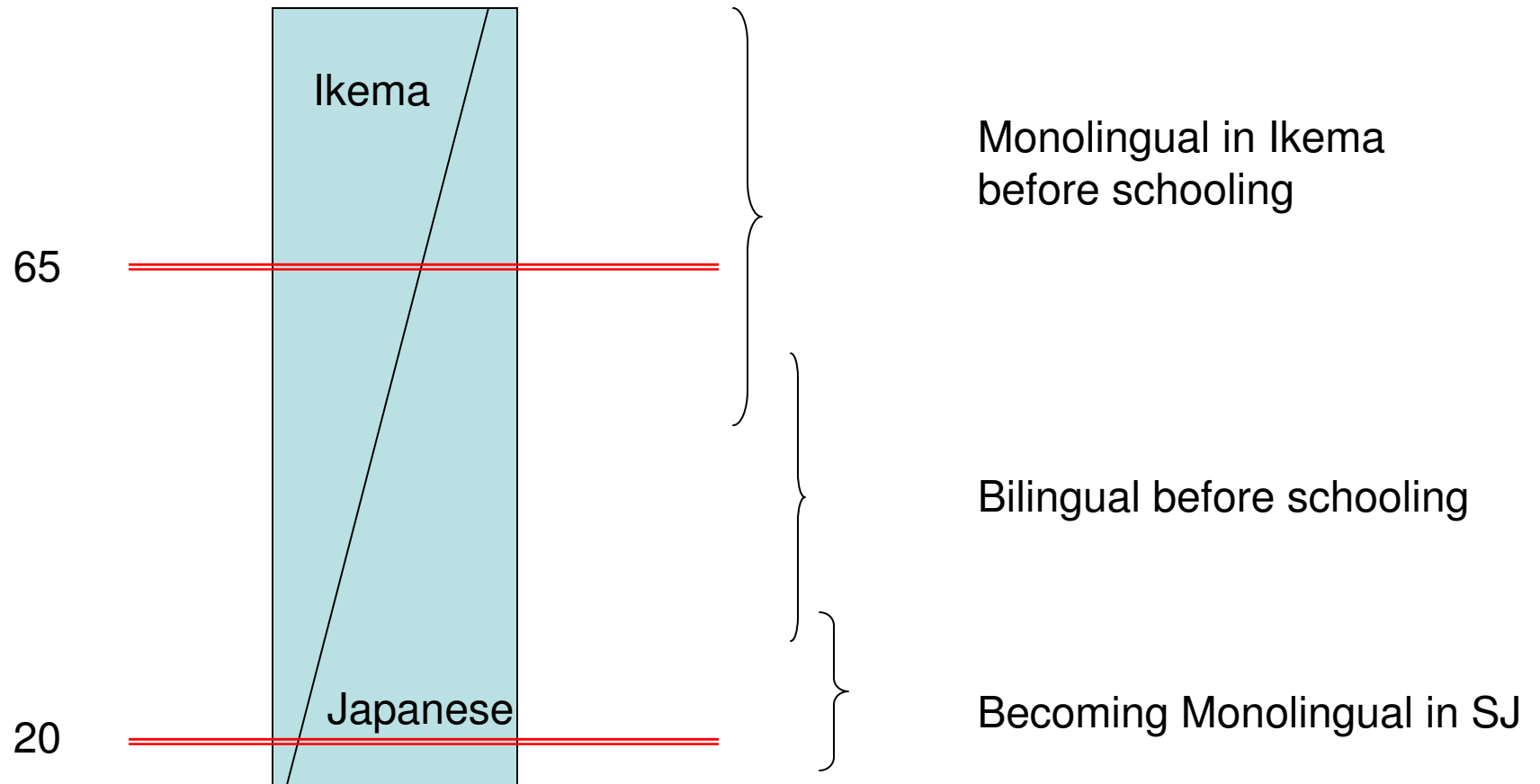
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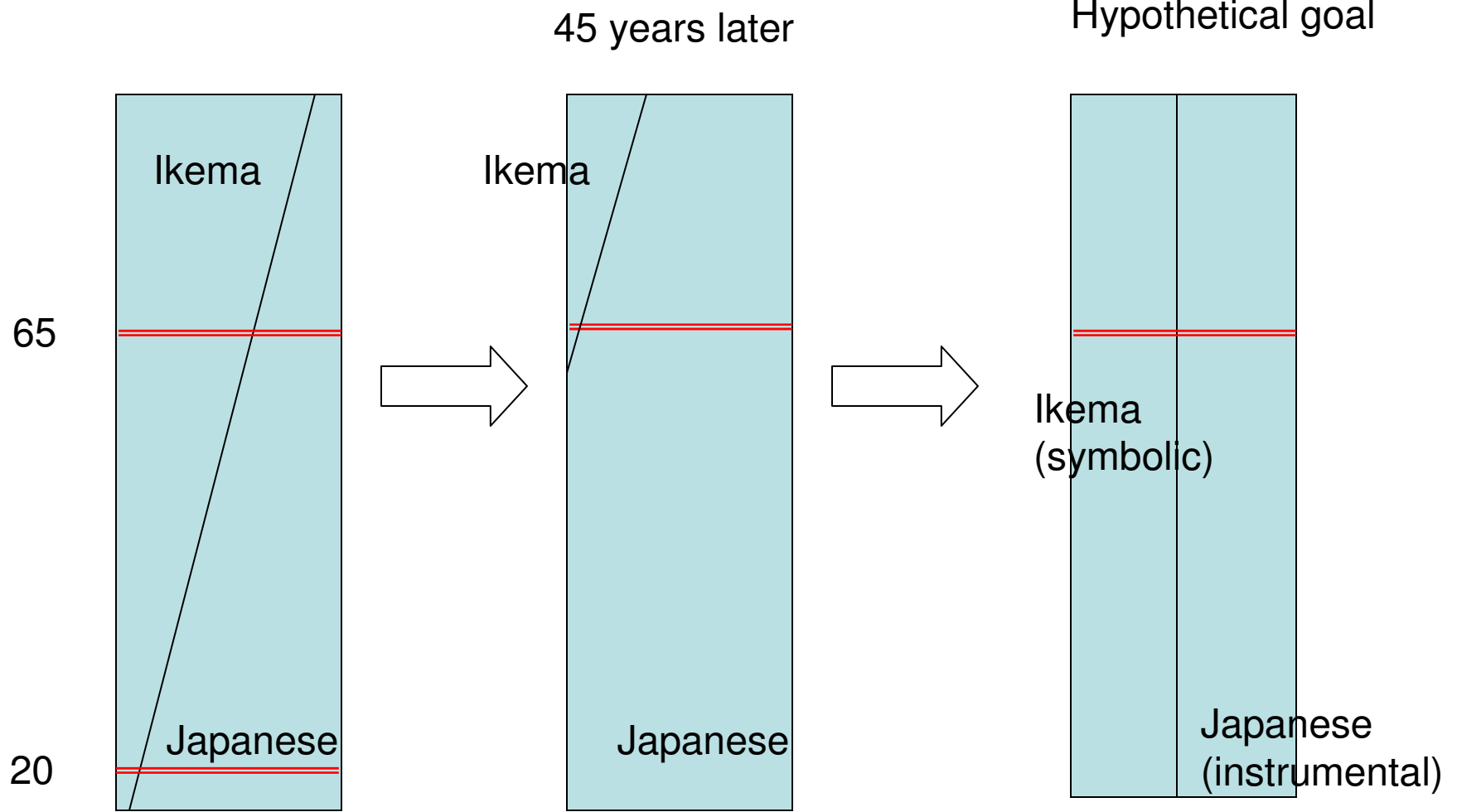
	Total population	Population over 65
Ikema	682	338 (49.5%)
Nishihara	1004	374 (37.2%)
Sarahama	3387	1000 (29.5%)
Total	5073	1712 (33.7%)

2005 Census

# Levels of bilingualism







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## Growing external support

- Activists movements
- Governmental legislations, resolutions
- “Okinawan Boom” (1990~)

More importantly....

Local grassroots resources and efforts

- Religious ceremonies
- Social gathering (*Otoori* speech in Nishihara)
- Festivals (*Myakudutsu*, Folk song and dance festivals...)
- Local community activities (speech contests, 'Opera' ...)

# What can linguists do?

- Documentation
  - external (video-, audio-taping of speech activities)
  - internal (linguistic analysis with living speakers)
  - e.g. “Digital Museum” at Kyoto University
- Cooperation with the local community
  - to create a hospitable environment for language maintenance
  - to preserve the heritage that surrounds the language
  - e.g. *Hiyodori* project, *Kyunufukarasha* project, ...









