The Diversity of the Ryukyuan Languages

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"A language is a dialect with an army and a navy".

This line, popularized by sociolinguist Max Weinreich, encapsulates the plight of a large number of the world's minority languages that lack official status. On the surface, the difference between a language and dialect appears to be trivial—many people have the intuition that speakers of two different languages cannot understand each other, but that speakers of two different dialects can. However, a closer look at what are called languages and what are called dialects throughout the world defies this generalization. Italy is one such country which boasts linguistic diversity. While Sicilian, Ligurian, and Sardinian are considered dialects of Italian, they are no less different from Italian as are other Romance languages such as Spanish and French. A line from the Lord's Prayer serves to illustrate this difference:

Standard Italian (italiano)	*Dacci oggi il nostro pane quotidiano*
Ligurian (ligure)	*Danne ancö u nostru pan cutidian*
Sardinian (sardu)	*Dona nos oe su pane nostru de ònna*
Sicilian (sicilianu)	*Dàtannillu a sta jurnata lu panuzzu cutiddianu*
Spanish	*Danos hoy nuestro pan de cada día*
English	*Give us this day our daily bread*

These 'dialects' are shown by linguists to be different languages. Ligurian is closer to Spanish and French than it is to Standard Italian, while Sardinian separated from the other Romance languages early on. Even Sicilian, which is the closest language to Standard Italian in this set, looks quite different.

On the other end, there are also various cases of languages that are officially separate but that are mutually intelligible to a high degree. The breakup of Yugoslavia led to the separation of Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian, and Montenegrin into different languages for both sociopolitical and national identity reasons. While these four languages differ with respect to usage of Latin or Cyrillic script, they are mutually intelligible. In fact, the first sentence of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is the same across all four languages: S*va ljudska bića rađaju se slobodna i jednaka u dostojanstvu i pravima* "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." Of course, to call these languages 'dialects' would be to deprive these nations of their autonomy.

Now perhaps we want to say that politics drives the labeling of languages and dialects arbitrarily, but that we can still abide by the mutual intelligibility criterion to *linguistically* define languages and dialects. However, even that is not so simple! Take the case of Scandinavian languages—while Norwegians understand both Stockholm Swedish and Copenhagen Danish fairly well, Stockholm Swedes and Copenhagen Danes actually have trouble understanding each other. If we were to call Norwegian and Swedish the same language and Norwegian and Danish the same language because of mutual intelligibility, then by transitivity, Swedish and Danish must be the same language too. But this is clearly untrue if we go by the same mutual criterion! Thus, we find ourselves in a bind. This situation in which two languages do not understand each other, but both understand a third language that in turn understands them is actually not uncommon in the world. In fact, sometimes there is even unidirectional comprehension—Portuguese speakers may understand a fair bit of Spanish, but Spanish speakers do not generally understand Portuguese. These situations are known as *dialect continua.* Romance languages lie on a continua, as do dialects of German and Dutch.

As Weinreich's quote alludes to, the labeling of a variety of speech as a language is tied to nationhood and power. Along with this comes a common assumption that varieties of speech within a nation are dialects of the national language. Japan is one country for which the misconception of 'one nation, one language, one culture' persists in the present day. Everyone is Japanese and everyone speaks Japanese. However, Japan is not and has never been monocultural nor monolithic. This myth has contributed to the erasure of the minority populations of Japan. In the north live the Ainu, an indigenous group that has been edged northward and whose language is now spoken by no more than a handful of people. To the south live the Ryukyuans, a diverse group of people who speak a diverse set of languages and who are the focus of this article. While Japanese people do understand that Ryukyuans are a different group to some extent, they still mistakenly view them monolithically. Ryukyuans are called 沖縄人 *Okinawa-jin* ('Okinawans') by the Japanese, as they live primarily in Okinawa Prefecture. However, this is a misnomer, as the Okinawans are only one subgroup of the Ryukyuans. This double layer of mischaracterization as another group (by the Japanese as Okinawans and by the non-Japanese as Japanese) is emblematic of the erasure that Ryukyuans have long experienced. Few outside of Japan even realize that the Ryukyu kingdom was once an independent state. This erasure is a major obstacle in the preservation and revitalization of the Ryukyuan languages.

Before delving into the diversity of the Ryukyuan cultures and languages, we must first backtrack to prehistory, before the groups differentiated and fanned out. While there is archaeological evidence that the Ryukyu Islands have been inhabited for at least 30,000 years, the original cultures are not contiguous with modern Ryukyu culture. The agricultural ancestors of modern-day Ryukyuan and Japanese speakers, the Proto-Japonic speakers, migrated from the Korean Peninsula into Kyushu, the southernmost of the four largest islands in Japan, approximately around the beginning of the Common Era, bringing rice farming technology. From there, Japanese speakers pushed northward, displacing the indigenous Ainu. Meanwhile, Ryukyuan began to differentiate from Japanese on the island of Kyushu and by the beginning of the second millennium CE, these speakers began to sail southward into the Ryukyuan Islands, first populating the northern part of the archipelago down as far south as Okinawa. A second expansion later populated the southern part, known as the Sakishima Islands, stopping at the island of Yonaguni, just short of Taiwan. These migrations coincide with the establishment of 城 *gusuku,* Okinawan-style stone fortresses that exist all over the Ryukyus. This era marked a rapid replacement of the original hunter-gatherers with the Ryukyuan agriculturalists and the shift of society from the coasts inland on the Okinawan mainland.

A unified Ryukyu started to take shape when the central kingdom of Okinawa, 中山 *Chūzan,* conquered its neighbors to the north and south in 1429 and established 琉球王国 *Ryūkyū Ōkoku,* the Ryukyu kingdom. The capital became the city of Shuri and the speech there became the standard Okinawan language of the Ryukyu kingdom, Uchinaaguchi. By the following century, it absorbed the Sakishima Islands and subsequently, the northern Amami Islands 1571. While paying tribute to China, the Ryukyu kingdom used its strategic position in the Pacific to establish itself as an intermediary trading point between East and Southeast Asia for approximately two hundred years. Okinawa's dominance, however, was not accepted without resistance. Unhappy with the policy of paying tribute upon incorporation into the Ryukyu kingdom, the Yaeyaman Islands in Sakishima launched a rebellion in 1500, led by Oyake Akahachi of Ishigaki. This plan, however, was thwarted by Nakasone Tuyumuya of Miyako (the nearest Sakishima Island to Okinawa), who defeated Akahachi and proceeded to conquer the furthest island of Yonaguni, cementing Ryukyu domination over the Sakishimas. While Akahachi's rebellion ultimately failed, he is still seen as a hero in the Yaeyamas and plays dramatizing the events are still put on frequently in the region, a marker of lingering pride in Yaeyaman identity as unique in the Ryukyus.

The sovereignty of the Ryukyu kingdom was not to last long, however, as the 薩摩藩 *Satsuma-han,* a domain of feudal Japan, advanced southward and invaded and absorbed the Amami Islands by 1611 and turned the rest of the Kingdom into a vassal state. As a direct consequence, the seat of government imposed high taxes on the Sakishimas, particularly the Yaeyamas as punishment for insubordination a century earlier. Further suffering came a century later, when the 明和の大津波 *Meiwa no Ōtsunami* ('Meiwa Mega-tsunami') of 1771 wiped out half the population of the Sakishimas. Saltwater from the tsunami caused agricultural conditions to deteriorate, leading to famine and further depopulation. Hit hardest was the village of Shiraho on southeastern Ishigaki that bore the brunt of the tsunami. To repopulate the village of only 28 survivors, the Ryukyu government forced 418 people from Hateruma, an island approximately 50 kilometers away, to migrate. The modern Shiraho variety of Yaeyaman is thus closely related to that of Hateruma, which is highly divergent from the varieties on Ishigaki.

As Japan began to establish itself as an imperial power in East Asia during the Meiji Restoration, one of its first victims was the Ryukyu kingdom, which was invaded and turned into a feudal domain of Japan, 琉球藩 *Ryūkyū-han.* Ryukyu-han was officially turned to Okinawa Prefecture in 1879, with the Amami Islands becoming part of Kagoshima Prefecture, the southernmost prefecture of Kyushu. From this period on began the forced assimilation of the Ryukyus, leading the diverse cultures and languages of the Ryukyus down the path of homogenization, conformity, and gradual erasure.

Absorption into the Japanese empire led to a shift in the power dynamics. As the Ryukyus were no longer independent, the languages became subordinate to Japanese, a status shift that set off a chain of events leading to the present-day endangerment. School was made compulsory on the islands, such that Ryukyuans could learn Standard Japanese and communicate with their new rulers. Educators emphasized similarities between Ryukyuan languages and Japanese, relegating Ryukyuan languages to 方言 *hōgen* ('dialect') status in order to foster a sense of loyalty to Japanese identity. As the Japanese empire invaded Taiwan and Korea in 1895 and 1910, respectively, Ryukyuans began to feel greater affinity toward Japan, no doubt fueled both by similarities in culture and language inherited from common ancestors and a sense that Taiwan and Korea were much more different from Japan than they were.

The leadup to World War II fueled Japanese nationalism, leading to further suppression of Ryukyuan languages, knowledge of which was seen as a hindrance to unity. Schools were once again at the forefront of promoting standardization, meting out punishment to students who spoke Ryukyuan languages. The most notorious punishment, still vividly remembered by elderly speakers in the present day, involved forcing students who spoke in a Ryukyuan language to wear a 方言札 *hōgen fuda* ('dialect tag') as a kind of badge of shame. Other manipulations included forcing students to repeat that *hōgen* was the 'enemy of the nation' daily as well as writing any Ryukyuan words one was caught uttering in school

on a shirt and washing it off. These psychological punishments created feelings of shame and fear around the use of Ryukyuan. In the public sphere, those who used Ryukyuan languages in a public space could be denied a public service or fined. Matters escalated during the wartime, when use of Ryukyuan could lead to execution under the pretense of espionage.

Use of Japanese came to be associated with modernity, progress, and development of the Ryukyus. The success of the Japanese government in fostering the conception of learning Japanese as a public good and the devaluation of Ryukyuan languages sowed the seeds for pro-Japanese sentiment to carry into the postwar era. Okinawa Prefecture became a territory of the United States between 1945 and 1972, a separation that theoretically could have been an impetus for either a movement for independence or for shifting alliance to the US. However, pro-Japanese sentiment turned out to be at an all-time high. A majority wished to be returned to Japan, and despite American attempts to stimulate Ryukyuan pride as a separate entity from Japan and encouragement to switch to schooling in Ryukyuan languages, the lack of any foundation for such a system, such as a unified orthography or resources, meant that these attempts were futile. 方言札 *hōgen fuda* were even reinstated to further promote usage of Standard Japanese. The 1950s were a turning point as the Ryukyuan languages began to no longer be passed on to the next generation. This era marked the beginning of Japanese monolingualism in the Ryukyus.

In the present day, active suppression of Ryukyuan languages is no longer enforced. In fact, Ryukyuan culture is even taught to some extent in schools and Ryukyuan ceremonies are still carried out. However, the language situation has actually reached a dire point. Language ability and attitudes have shifted to a point at which revitalization of Ryukyuan languages is an uphill battle. Since Ryukyuan languages had already ceased to be passed down to future generations about 70 years ago, many of the languages have few fluent speakers under the age of 70. Most of these speakers are in the grandparent or great-grandparent generation and have a smaller role in raising newborns. Even though many younger Ryukyuans these days have a neutral or positive view about Ryukyuan languages, they themselves are mainly understanders or passive speakers of Ryukyuan languages and so cannot play a direct role in transmitting the languages to their children.

Language ideologies also play an important role. Propaganda from the 20th century painting Japanese as modern and Ryukyuan as outdated yielded effects that trickled to the present day. Younger people view what their grandparents speak as 方言 *hōgen,* dialect that outsiders happen to not understand, but one would be hard-pressed to hear someone call it 言語 *gengo,* language. The use of the word 方言 *hōgen* inevitably places it in a subsidiary and peripheral relationship to Japanese, which has status as 言語 *gengo*. This relationship, however, does not actually translate to disdain in the present day, but rather to limitation. The domain of Ryukyuan languages has become primarily ceremony—song and dance, religious and cultural festivals. It is seen as the language of tradition and of the distant past. Dialogue in Ryukyuan languages is sprinkled into school plays, memorized, and recited by schoolchildren, but soon forgotten afterwards. Ryukyuan languages are no longer seen as the speech of everyday life and activities, but as the speech of ritual. In immigrant communities around the world, while it is a given that the immigrant language is not generally the language of the public sphere, it tends to at least survive as the language of the home. In the Ryukyus, Japanese has become the language of most homes. It is even not uncommon to see elderly couples switch from their common Ryukyuan language into Japanese often when speaking with each other. Sometimes they even exclusively use Japanese with each other. Strangers on the street can no longer assume that one another will understand anything other than Japanese.

How quickly the language situation has shifted cannot be understated. One speaker in his eighties that I worked with described his marvel at how much had changed over his lifetime. He told me that his mother would refuse to pick up the phone because she had a weak command of Japanese and was primarily a speaker of Ssabumuni, the 白保 Shiraho variety of Yaeyaman. The speaker himself grew up speaking both Ssabumuni and Japanese. His children exclusively speak Japanese but can understand Ssabumuni. His grandchildren, however, are completely monolingual in Japanese and do not understand Ssabumuni. This rapid change was accompanied by a sweep of modernization in the region. This same man recalls the ten kilometer trek he would take every day in his wooden *sapa* ('sandals'), to get to school, before making the entire journey back. He remembers the excitement of seeing a bicycle for the first time. As a child, he experienced hunger very frequently, but these days, he can reach into the refrigerator and pull out a can of Coca-Cola. To him, it is amazing how connected to the rest of the world youth are these days with this tool known as the 'Internet'.

The modernization and globalization described by this speaker have been a double-edged sword for the Ryukyus. Among the Ryukyuan languages, those in the Yaeyama subgroup are in the most dire situation. Various contributing factors exacerbate the situation beyond the consequences of Japanese policies that had affected the entirety of the Ryukyus. One significant factor is the pull of economic growth; the tourism industry is a large source of income for the region. Tourism is largely driven by the breathtaking scenery of the Yaeyaman Islands—from the emerald seas to the vibrant coral reefs to the verdant mountains to the biodiverse jungles. The New Ishigaki Airport on Ishigaki Island, the population center of the Yaeyamas, was opened in 2013, replacing the previous strictly domestic airport. The international terminal serves flights from Hong Kong and Taiwan. This development has greatly bolstered Ishigaki's tourism industry but had originally met with resistance from many locals, as the location by the Shiraho coast would pollute the coral reefs there. This tension between modernization and preservation has persisted. As recently as 2019, protests have arisen against the development of a new resort on Kondoi Beach on Taketomi (a small island that neighbors Ishigaki) on the grounds that it would pollute the sea and disrupt the livelihood of the islanders who wish to avoid the hustle and bustle of a mass of tourists.

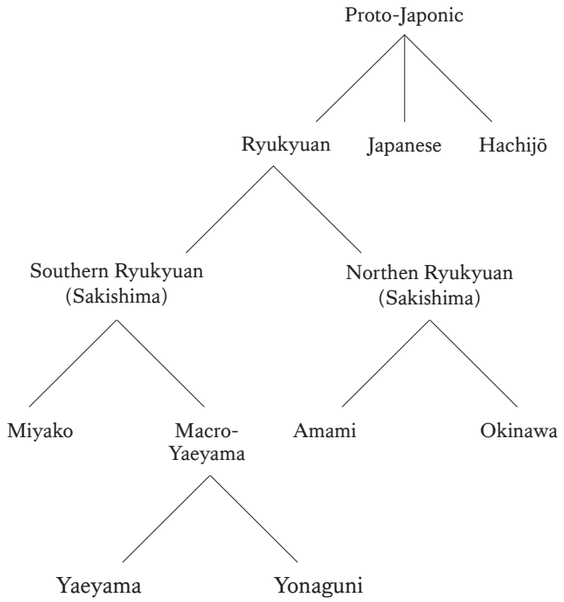
This tug-of-war between economic growth and preservation of the natural beauty of the Yaeyamas is mirrored in the pull between the growing influence of global languages and preservation of indigenous ones. The quickly expanding tourist industry makes Ishigaki an attractive spot for entrepreneurs, particularly as the new airport has brought in an influx of Taiwanese and Hong Kong tourists—both these places are a 45 minute and 2-hour flight away, respectively, a closer trip than much of mainland Japan. As a population center, many residents of Ishigaki are also migrants from other Yaeyaman islands, other parts of the Ryukyus, and mainland Japan. Japanese mainlanders in particular come to take part in commerce and tourism. Many businesses in downtown Ishigaki are owned by migrants. As the language of the nation, Japanese is also naturally the language of business. With the growth of international tourism, Chinese is becoming a popular second language to learn as an alternative to English. While attitudes towards local languages have swung to the side of appreciation, the attraction of international languages is strong. As the Yaeyamas find themselves in a position to cater to the global market, knowledge of widely spoken languages becomes a priority and pushes revitalization of indigenous languages further into the background.

The migrant situation also has ramifications for language use in the household. A non-trivial number of households consist of couples who cannot speak to each other in a Ryukyuan language, as they either speak differing mutually unintelligible Ryukyuan languages or one member only speaks Japanese. As a result, Japanese is left as the only option with which to communicate. Even within the Yaeyamas, language diversity is high enough to the point that couples who speak different varieties of Yaeyaman may have difficulty comprehending each other's variety. This vast diversity is unfortunately invisible to the average Japanese mainlander. Many Japanese who come to Okinawa Prefecture for vacation or for business hold the misconception that the only unfamiliar speech there is the Okinawan dialect of Japanese, known as Uchinaa-yamatoguchi. This assumption is reflected in some tourists' use of Okinawan phrases such as *haisai* and *nifeedeebiru,* 'hello' and 'thank you' in Okinawan, rather than the corresponding Ishigaki phrases *mishaaroorunneeraa and niihaiyuu,* when visiting Ishigaki. The homogenized view of the languages is even reflected in naming practices of some businesses. The use of Ryukyuan may be used to provide an 'exotic' flavor to draw in customers. One such business is a hostel in the heart of town, named *Churayado,* composed of *chura,* 'beautiful' in Uchinaaguchi, and *yado* 'inn' in Japanese. Had the owner wanted to be linguistically appropriate, they may have opted to incorporate the Ishigaki word for 'beautiful', *kaishan,* instead. The misuse of Uchinaaguchi in the setting of Ishigaki conceals one of many differences between the cultures.

The various obstacles mentioned above seem to paint a bleak future for Yaeyaman languages in particular, but not all hope is lost. One Ryukyuan language that has maintained some stability is Meeramuni, the 宮良 Miyara variety of Yaeyaman Ryukyuan, which is spoken by a fair number of people in their 50s. Interestingly, but perhaps not surprisingly, conservatism has played a role in the preservation of Meeramuni. Compared to other villages on Ishigaki, Miyara is a relatively closed society—outsiders are not welcome to witness certain festivals and marrying someone outside the village is comparatively rarer. When men do marry women from outside, the women are taught at least basic Meeramuni by the 宮良婦人会 *Miyara Fujinkai* ('Miyara Wives' Association'), who have published a website with basic vocabulary and sentences (Miyara Fujinkai n.d.). Young men are taught Miyaran traditions from a young age by elders and through this learn at least some Meeramuni. In fact, some men in their 30s and 40s appear to be able to speak Meeramuni with a high level of fluency. However, young people's Meeramuni is criticized by elders for not using polite and honorific language correctly. Simplification and loss of parts of a language is a common occurrence in endangered languages. Unfortunately, this yields a common attitude: *if you cannot speak the language properly, do not speak it at all.* This desire for linguistic purity is a barrier to continued usage of the language, as it breeds lack of self-confidence in speaking the language. These younger speakers certainly have a grasp of the language, even if it differs from that of their elders. However, intergenerational difference is a given in *any* language—even speakers of languages such as Japanese and English do not speak the same as their parents or grandparents. Willingness to accept change is key if a language is to be revitalized.

Archipelagos are hotbeds of linguistic differentiation. Much like Darwin's Galápagos finches, the Ryukyuan languages are a trove

of diversity, differing both minorly and majorly in many distinct ways. Natural barriers such as oceans, jungles, and mountains, which are difficult to traverse between, are conducive to isolation and subsequently to both linguistic and biological diversity. When we think about how languages change and diversify, a biological analogy is once again apt. As time passes, organisms differentiate—mammals diversify into rodents and primates. Rodents diversify into mice and squirrels; primates into humans and apes, and so on. In the same way, Proto-Japonic, as spoken on Kyushu, split into Ryukyuan and Japanese and over time Japanese diversified into the various Japanese regional dialects. Ryukyuan split into Northern and Southern groups and those groups further changed. So we can think of modern Ryukyuan languages as distant cousins from one another and even more distant from Japanese dialects. The tree below is a proposal by linguist Thomas Pellard of the splits of the language family (Heinrich et al. 2015:14).



We can see that there are various modern Ryukyuan languages—split into at least five languages: Amami and Okinawan (Northern Ryukyuan) and Miyako, Yaeyaman, and Yonaguni (Southern Ryukyuan or Sakishima). Each of these languages, however, is better characterized as a dialect chain, in which dialects at the extremes are not mutually intelligible. A quick look at the simple sentence 'Where are you going?' in a number of Ryukyuan languages and Japanese show how different they are from Japanese and also from each other.

SUBFAMILY	LANGUAGE	SENTENCE
Northern Ryukyuan	Shuri Okinawan	*maa-nkai ichu-ga*
Southern Ryukyuan	Ishigaki Yaeyaman	*zïma-nkai-du haru*
	KabiraYaeyaman	*duma-hee-du paru*
	MiyaraYaeyaman	*zïma-ge-du haru*
	Taketomi Yaeyaman	*maa-ĩ-du hari-ya*
	Kuroshima Yaeyaman	*maa-ha-du paru-ya*
	Iriomote Yaeyaman	*zan-tti ngi-rya*
	Shiraho Yaeyaman	*za-go-du ngo*
	Yonaguni	*nma-nki hiru-nga*
Japanese	Tokyo Japanese	*doko-e iku-no*
English	Standard English	*where are you going?*

Even looking at the sentence in different varieties of just Yaeyaman, one can see how rich the variation is. The differences are large enough such that there is not even much of a unified sense of 'Yaeyaman' being a language or a cohesive identity. When asking speakers how they identify, they will primarily bring up the village they are from. Thus, a speaker of Ssabumuni (Shiraho Yaeyaman) will say they are *Ssabupitu* 'a person from Ssabu (白保 Shiraho, in Japanese)'. While the common word for Yaeyama is *Yaima* or *Yeema,* few call themselves *Yaimapitu/Yeemapitu.* Even varieties on the same island, such as Ishigaki, Kabira, Miyara, and Shiraho, can be quite different from one another, as can be seen in the sentences above. Speakers of Ssabumuni say that they cannot understand speakers of Meeramuni and vice versa. While those in the older generation express strong feelings about these local identities, the feelings do not percolate to those in the younger generation, who tend to identify primarily as Japanese, showing a trend towards homogeneity.

The sentences above also show that although the Ryukyuan languages and Japanese differ in word choice and sounds, word order remains quite stable. One way in which we can see the diversity of Ryukyuan languages is in the number of vowels. Japanese dialects have 5 vowels: *a, i, u, e, o.* Ryukyuan languages, on the other hand vary in the number of vowels they have. Some, such as Yonaguni, have as few as 3 (*a, i, u*) and others, such as Amami, have as many as 7: the same 5 as Japanese plus *ï,* a vowel similar to the *e* in *roses*, and *ë,* which is similar to the *a* in *about.* Some languages, such as Teedunmuni, the Taketomi variety of Yaeyaman, also have nasal vowels like Portuguese, as in the Brazilian city of *São Paulo.*

The sounds of one Ryukyuan language in particular, Dunan (the Yonaguni language), have changed so much that it can be difficult to recognize, without deeper knowledge, words that actually derive from the same source as their counterparts in other Japonic languages. Below are a few examples comparing the Dunan word with the same word in Yaeyaman, its closest relative (specifically the Meeramuni variety) and with Japanese.

DUNAN	MEERAMUNI	JAPANESE	MEANING
nni	*puni*	*hune*	'boat'
ttu	*pïtu*	*hito*	'human'
kkurun	*sïkurun*	*tsukuru*	'to make'
nnu	*kïnoo*	*kinō*	'yesterday'

The main reason Dunan looks so different is because it has lost *i/ĩ* and *u,* which can still be seen in Japanese and Meeramuni, between some consonants, followed by blending of the preceding consonant into the following one. For example, in 'yesterday', *i* dropped out and *k* blended into the following *n*. The loss of these vowels and blending of the consonants has led to Dunan developing a series of double consonants at the beginning of words, a feature that makes it quite distinct from Japanese, which does not allow any double consonants at the beginning of words. Dunan shows us how quickly and drastically language can change over time.

One feature that is common in many languages, and indeed across the Japonic languages is the distinction of words by pitch. In Japanese, the words 今 *íma* ('now') and 居間 *imá* ('living room'), where the acute accent (*´*) represents a high pitch, are differentiated by where the high pitch is on the word. Dunan is also a language that makes use of pitch to distinguish words. We can see this difference in the three sentences below. Subjects can be omitted in Japonic languages and instead inferred from context—I have put a possible subject in parentheses in the sentences below for clarity. Here, the acute accent represents a high pitch as well, while the circumflex (*ˆ*) represents a falling pitch.

nni-du buru (They) look alike.
nní-du buru (Someone) is dying.
nnî-du buru (Someone) is watching.

[FIG_1]
[FIG_2]
[FIG_3]

At the end of the chapter are pitch tracks for the three sentences. The boundaries for each sound in the word are demarcated on the horizontal axis, while the pitch at each point in time is marked by the position on the vertical axis. As can be seen, the pitch patterns for both the words *nni-* 'to look like' and *nní-* 'to die' are both relatively flat, but is higher for *nní-*. The pitch pattern for *nnî-* 'to look at', on the other hand, shows a pattern of rising sharply before falling. These three words are minimally different, distinguished only by the pitch pattern of the word.

Some Yaeyaman varieties are unique in that they distinguish grammatical meaning by pitch as well. The use of pitch to mark *grammatical meaning* is relatively rare in the world's languages. Most of the languages that do so are found in West Africa. To see this process at work, we can compare how Funeemuni (spoken in 船浮 *Funauki* on Iriomote Island) distinguishes the non-past tense from the present progressive with how Japanese and English do so:

LANGUAGE	NON-PAST	PRESENT PROGRESSIVE
Funeemuni	*ukiru*	*uki**í**ru*
Japanese	*okiru*	*okite* **iru**
English	*gets up/will get up*	**is** *get***ing** *up*

[FIG_4]
[FIG_5]

The bolding represents the part that distinguishes the present progressive from the present. In Funeemuni, it is merely the high tone on *í* that does so. In Japanese and English, however, both the verb itself changes and another word is also added, showing how different the strategy is between the two languages. Below are two sentences that show the meaning difference in the verbs more clearly. In both the word and full sentence examples, there is a clear fall in pitch in the present progressive form. Meeramuni uses this same strategy to distinguish these meanings as well.

minaa-ra-du ukiru (Starting) now, I will get up
minaa-du ukíru I am getting up now

[FIG_6]
[FIG_7]

In Ssabumuni, pitch is also used to distinguish grammatical meaning. Once again, the progressive is involved, but the contrast is instead with another form known as the resultative. To understand the meaning of the *resultative,* let's take a look at the following sentences and the pitch tracks.

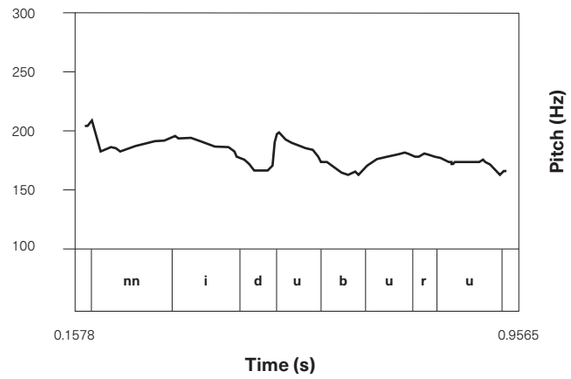
ami-n-du feru-rá Oh, it must have rained.
mi-n-du féru-rá Oh, it is raining.

[FIG_8]
[FIG_9]

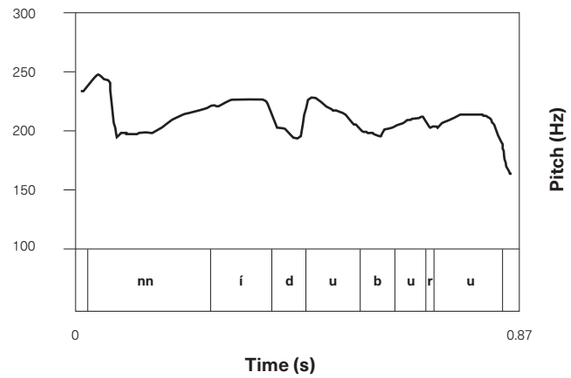
First let's observe the pitch trajectory. When the *e* in *feru* does not have a high pitch, the drop is slight in the following syllable *ru,* before rising for the high pitch in *-rá* (an ending that expresses that the speaker has observed something). If there is a high pitch on the é, there is a steep drop in the following syllable, much like in the Funeemuni examples. The resultative meaning is used when the speaker infers that something must have happened. Imagine a situation in which a speaker exits a building and sees that it is wet outside, although it is not raining. From seeing the wet ground, they infer that it must have rained, and say the first example sentence: *ami-n-du feru-rá.*

We can see that the diversity of the Ryukyuan languages helps to provide not only a better understanding of Japanese but also of language in general. Just as the loss of species is a blow to biodiversity and a better understanding of life, the loss of Ryukyuan languages would be a blow to linguistic diversity and a better understanding of how language works. While revitalization is an uphill battle, it is not an impossible one, and there have been various efforts at encouraging usage in the Yaeyamas. One activist is 半嶺まどか Madoka Hammine, a young member of the Miyara community who has endeavored to learn Meeramuni, her heritage language. Madoka has undoubtedly faced obstacles and frustrations, having encountered elders who found it amusing that she was trying to speak Meeramuni or who did not want to respond to her in Meeramuni at all. However, the fruits of her efforts have paid off, as elders have turned around to being appreciative of her devotion and are now happy to converse with her and touched that a young member wishes to learn the ancestral language. Madoka has also proceeded to teach elementary schoolchildren basic words and phrases in Meeramuni. As schoolchildren are pivotal in the revitalization of language, Madoka and I wanted to find ways to captivate their interest. Inspired by hearing a series of translations of Disney songs into local Japanese dialects and Uchinaaguchi, I worked with 山根慶子 Keiko Yamane, an elder speaker of Shikamuni (Ishigaki Yaeyaman), to translate *Let It Go* (from the movie *Frozen*), a heavily popular song among youth at the time, into her language (Miifaiyu 2017). Madoka worked with elders to translate this song, titled *Duu-nu Assoo-taanaa* 'In one's own way' (Ooritaboori 2018a), as well as *How Far I'll Go,* titled *Ikooba-nu* 'How far' (Ooritaboori 2018b), from another Disney film, Moana, into her language. Her covers sparked the excitement of the elementary students she taught. At the societal level, there are community members with much pride for their language who hold sessions to study, learn, and practice the language—attendance to these sessions by children is gradually growing. Annually, the Yaeyamas (as well as other Ryukyuan islands) also hold 方言大会 hōgen taikai ('dialect speech competitions'), in which participants perform a speech in their language to an audience. All these contributions play a role in redialing views of Ryukyuan languages from *negative* and *old* to *positive* and *modern.* However, in order for revitalization to occur, there must be *intergenerational transmission;* that is, proficient speakers must be able to pass the language on to the younger generation. As mentioned, one large barrier is that proficient speakers are not the primary caretakers of the new generation. Because of this, measures must be taken beyond the home to provide spaces for elderly speakers to use the heritage language with young people. Among language revitalization efforts across the world, the 'language nest' (*kōhanga reo*) model for Māori, the indigenous language of New Zealand, has been one of the most successful. In this model, children are immersed in the language by being taught in primary school by fluent elder speakers. This model has been replicated in Hawai'i (called *pūnana leo*) and would certainly be a useful system in the Ryukyus as well. Some small-scale attempts have been made. For example, the village of Tamagusuku on Okinawa established an *Uchinaaguchi* space for elderly speakers to socialize with young people in Okinawan. Nothing comparable yet has been established in the Yaeyamas. While all these attempts thus far are but seeds that have been planted, they will hopefully play a role in the larger goal of revitalization, a feat that will require resources, support from governmental bodies, and long-term commitment to the cause.

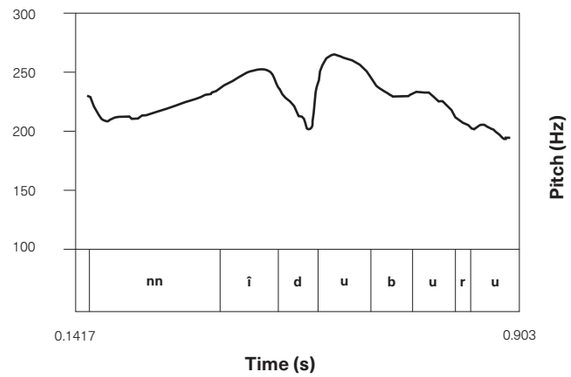
[FIG_1]



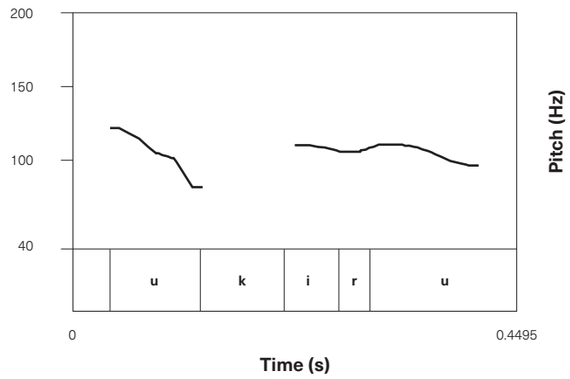
[FIG_2]



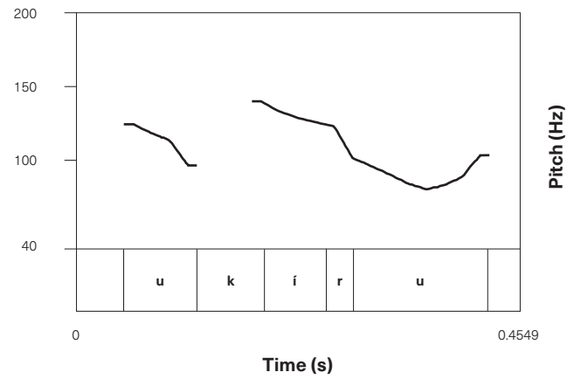
[FIG_3]



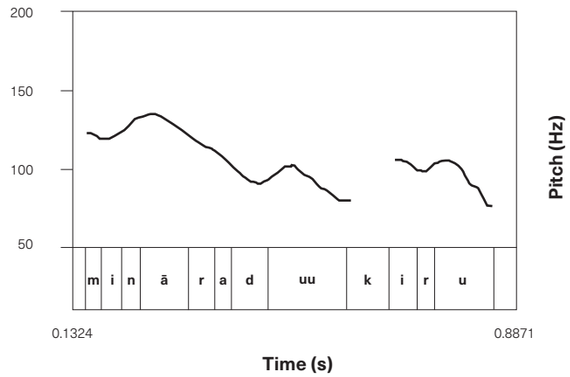
[FIG_4]



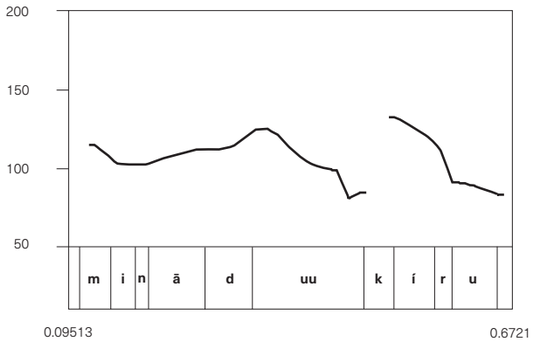
[FIG_5]



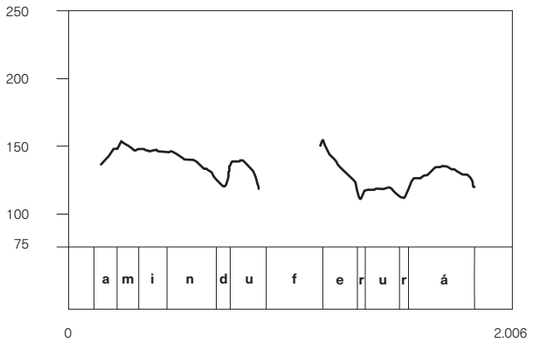
[FIG_6]



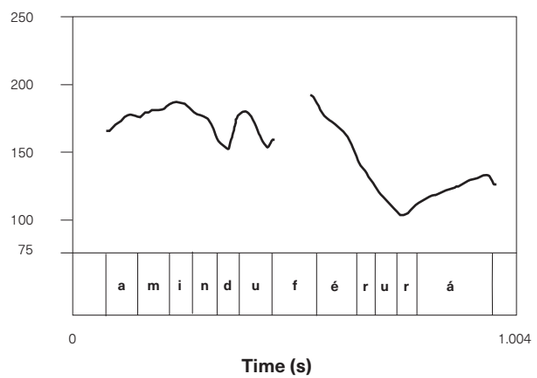
[FIG_7]



[FIG_8]



[FIG_9]



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