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Language Endangerment and Wellbeing in Japan

A hybrid *u:japan* lecture by Patrick Heinrich

Thursday
2025-10-23
18⁰⁰~19³⁰



<https://japanologie.univie.ac.at/ujapanlectures>



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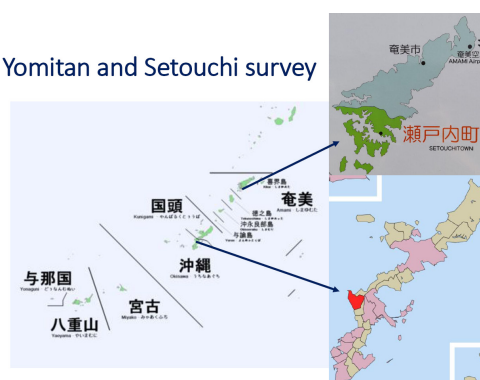
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Does language impact social issues such as poverty, poor health, or wellbeing? Across the world, Indigenous language speakers are shifting from their ancestral languages to dominant regional or national languages. Originally, this language shift was seen as progress and successful integration into mainstream society, but abandoning ancestral languages is now viewed differently. The focus has shifted onto the utilities and advantages of maintaining, revitalizing, or reclaiming ancestral languages. In line with this epistemological shift, the study of language endangerment and wellbeing has emerged as a new subfield in sociolinguistics.

Research across various societies has identified key factors influencing wellbeing, such as health, education, housing, job satisfaction, and leisure. Until recently, language choices and practices were not included in this framework. My presentation is divided into three sections: first, I briefly review current research on language and wellbeing; second, I discuss how the suppression of ancestral

languages has harmed the Ainu and Ryukyans; and third, I explore whether maintaining Ainu and Ryukyuan languages correlates with higher wellbeing. To investigate this, I conducted two quantitative surveys in Amami and Okinawa. I analyze the link between Ryukyuan language proficiency and wellbeing measures (Subjective Happiness Scale, Cantril's Ladder, Satisfaction with Life Scale), considering identity, social capital, and decolonization of the mind as moderating factors.

Yomitan and Setouchi survey



Inhabitants: 9,400
Southern-Amami
ISO code [ams]
Definitely endangered
Collected data: ~250

Inhabitants: 40,500
South-Central Okinawan
ISO code: [ryu]
Definitely endangered
Collected data: ~2,000



Patrick Heinrich is a professor of Japanese Language and Linguistics at Ca' Foscari University. Before joining Ca' Foscari in 2011, he worked for many years in Germany at Duisburg-Essen University and in Japan at Dokkyo University and the University of the Ryukyus. Trained in linguistics, his research has focussed on the history of Japanese linguistics, language attitudes and ideologies, and language endangerment. He has cofounded the Ryukyuan Heritage Language Society together with Masahide Ishihara and Shinsho Miyara and is an honorary member of the Foundation for Endangered Languages. His last edited book is *Ideologies of Communication in Japan* (together with Florian Grosser and Saana Santalahti). He is currently writing an *Introduction to Japanese Sociolinguistics*.

