

Ryukyuan language revitalization: Relying on historical awareness rather than religion

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In February 2009, UNESCO announced that there are 8 endangered languages in Japan. These languages are Ainu, Hachijo and the 6 languages spoken in the Ryukyu Islands. These languages are not subject to any noteworthy effort of protection by the Japanese government, and even voluntary efforts by revitalization movements are in a dangerous state.

When considering language revitalization, one is often drawn to cases in the West. There is for example Wales in the United Kingdom. In all Wales, not only around its capital Cardiff, Welsh was incorporated into compulsory school education in 1990. This marks a watershed event in Welsh language revitalization.

Furthermore, in Catalonia (Spain), often called the ace of language revitalization, regional autonomy was granted in 1979, setting an example for other regions in Spain to follow. On that occasion, the Catalan language was designated official language of that region. Today, school education is conducted through Catalan as a medium of instruction.

Yet another example is Hawai'i in the US. The Hawaiian language was designated as official language of the State of Hawai'i in 1978 in the Hawaiian constitution.

What all three cases share is that the persons who were central to language revitalization were Christians. The Ryukyus obviously differ in that respect. In my presentation, I would like to consider a future for the Ryukyuan languages in absence of Christian belief as a resource for language revitalization.