

# Effects of America's Direct Rule of Japanese Province of Okinawa on Okinawan/Ryukyuan Language Vitality



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## Introduction

Our research was done as a part of the Encyclopedia for Global Ethnolinguistic Conflict, a digital source of information about language conflicts and language rights issues around the world that is based off of the publication of *Language Conflict and Language Rights: Ethnolinguistic Perspectives on Human Conflict*, by Stanley Dubinsky and William Davies.

## I. Background Information

The Okinawan language is part of the Ryūkyūan language group, located on an island chain to the south of Japan. The relationship between Japanese and the Ryūkyūan languages is debated; however, the two are not mutually intelligible - Japanese linguist Shiro Hattori found that the Ryukyuan languages share only between 59 and 68 percent cognates with Tokyo Japanese. The Japanese government has claimed that the Ryukyuan languages, including Okinawan, are dialects of Japanese, but based on linguistic analyses of the languages, they have been proved to be distinct languages. The claim that they are "incorrect dialects" of mainland Japanese has historically been used to justify language suppression.

In 1879, Japan claimed sovereignty over the Ryukyuan islands and began enforcing use of Japanese. Soon after, the mainland Japanese government began taking measures to suppress use of the Ryukyuan languages, in favor of "Standard Japanese." Children were punished for using Okinawan in schools and laws required Standard Japanese to be spoken in all public offices. These policies, in conjunction with the idea that the Ryukyuan languages are inferior to the Japanese language, have significantly reduced the number of native speakers. Within the past several decades, each generation has lower Ryukyuan language proficiency than the prior generation, a trend that is likely to continue into the foreseeable future.

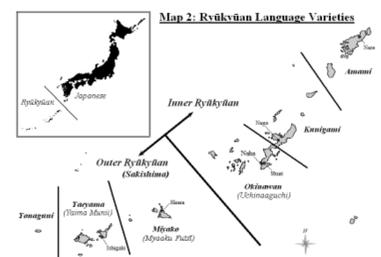
## II. American Occupation of the Ryukyus

In June of 1945, following the victory of American forces over the Japanese in the Battle of Okinawa, the Ryūkyūan Archipelago came under U.S. military occupation. Beginning in the 1950s, the American government established the United States Civil Administration of the Ryūkyū Islands, an agency charged with overseeing American control and administration of the Ryūkyū Islands. This organization would continue to serve as the supreme governing authority of the islands until 1972, when control of the Ryūkyūan Archipelago reverted back to Japan. In the initial stages of the occupation, U.S. authorities led several initiatives aimed at promoting Ryūkyūan languages and culture. These efforts included attempts to create school textbooks in Ryūkyūan languages and placing a ban on teaching materials from Mainland Japan. However, a combination of both loss of interest among American authorities as well as mistrust of the U.S. administrative officials among the Ryūkyūan populace ensured that these efforts would be short-lived.

## III. Okinawan/Ryukyuan Response

The American occupation of the Ryūkyūan Archipelago contributed to the precipitous decline of proficiency levels in the Ryūkyūan languages among the Ryūkyūan population in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There are two reasons for this. First, many in the Ryūkyūan community were immediately suspicious of U.S. efforts to promote the Ryūkyūan languages and culture. They believed that the U.S. sought to weaken the Ryūkyūan people's loyalty to, and their cultural and linguistic connection with, the Japanese Mainland. By doing so, U.S. authorities could make it less likely that the Ryūkyūan people would agitate for reunification with the Japanese Mainland, allowing the United States to maintain its control over the strategically valuable islands.

Second, the occupation created a number of unfavorable conditions, including widespread prostitution, that led many in the Ryūkyūan community to resent the American occupation and long to reunite with Mainland Japan. These popular attitudes manifested themselves in a number of Japanese Nationalist movements that developed on the Ryūkyū Islands during the U.S. occupation. These movements often promoted the use of the Standard Japanese language over the indigenous Ryūkyūan languages. Thus, "promotion of Standard Japanese after 1945 thus continued to serve as a means to foster a Japanese identity for the Ryūkyūan population and a means of resisting the unwelcome US occupation" (Heinrich, 2005).



Diversity of the Ryukyuan languages

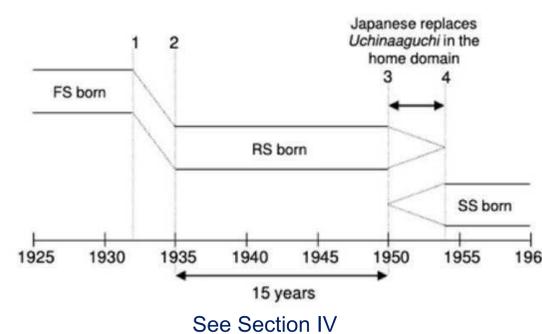


Aikwa Kindergarten, a Japanese language Kindergarten, in the Ryūkyūan capital, Shuri, Okinawa, c. 1907



Emblem of the United States Civil Administration of the Ryukyu Islands

Figure 4: Loss of mother tongue transmission during the tip phase



## IV. Effects on Language Vitality

The decision made by many in the Ryukyuan community to teach children the Japanese language over their native Ryukyuan languages, fostered in part by the American occupation, played a substantial role in the loss of the vitality of the Ryūkyūan languages. Around 1950, for the first time, there became a significant generational gap in Ryūkyūan language abilities between the newest generation and those that preceded it. A scholar and researcher of the Japanese-Ryukyuan language conflict states that "in most cases, people born after 1950 no longer speak Ryukyuan languages, particularly those living on Okinawa, the main island."

This graph is scholar Mark Anderson's attempt at reconstructing the profile of the language shift on the island of Okinawa. The tip phase depicted on the graph, beginning in 1950, indicates the beginning of the transition to point four at which time "intergenerational transmission of *Uchinaaguchi* in the home domain ceased" (Anderson, 252). This graph is consistent with observations that Anderson collected from sample data on the *Uchinaaguchi* language abilities of Okinawans.

## VII. Current State and Future Predictions of Language Vitality

Today, some are attempting to restore Ryūkyūan language abilities in their communities. One of the most well-known language activists is Fija Bairon, a performer and teacher of the Okinawan language. By making Okinawan trendy through classes and cultural performances, Fija hopes he can motivate young people to take pride in their unique heritage.

The Ryūkyūan Heritage society has identified 12 benefits of revitalizing the Ryukyuan languages. These include restoring Ryūkyūan pride, familiarizing younger generations with Ryūkyūan culture, and stopping the adaptation of Mainland Japanese culture. Although Ryukyuan language activists like Bairon are passionate, so far the trend of decreasing proficiency in Okinawan has continued. As the older generations die out in the next thirty to forty years, the Okinawan language may die out with them; UNESCO has estimated that as early as 2050, all of the Ryukyuan languages face extinction.

## Conclusion

Through language suppression policies in the twentieth century, the Japanese government was highly successful in reducing the use of Okinawan and the other Ryukyuan languages. This was not simply a direct effect of language suppression laws - Japanese nationalism managed to convince native Ryukyuan that their languages were inferior, and that speaking Japanese was necessary to be successful. While there were never bans on speaking Ryukyuan languages in private settings, it was often seen as lower-class, so families switched to speaking Japanese. While there are attempts to restore pride in Ryukyuan languages and cultures, it remains to be seen how successful these attempts will be.