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While we are asleep: Master/Mentor-Apprentice language learning initiative in the Ryukyus

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Abstract

I currently conduct participatory action research with new speakers of Ryukyuan languages by running a project called MAI-Ryukyus, which is designed based on Hinton's Master/Mentor-Apprentice Language Learning Program, to explore both emotional and cognitive aspects of learning one's own Indigenous ancestral tongue. The findings of the PhD research will be discussed in a future article. In this paper, I introduce my research design, discuss the issues identified in current language revitalisation efforts through ethnographic observation, and conclude with future directions.

Keywords: Indigenous transformative paradigm, language revitalisation efforts, Master/Mentor-Apprentice Language Learning Program, new speakers, Ryukyuan languages.

1. Imaginary paradise in Japan

Ryukyuan languages[1] are spoken in the Ryukyu[2] Islands which spread across six hundred miles in the north-western Pacific of South Japan (Kan 2011) (Figure 1). While the Ryukyu Islands have been a popular domestic destination for Japanese tourists where local people are assimilated to Japanese *to the right degree* with a touch of exoticism (Tada 2015), historical contexts of the Ryukyus and their current political affairs ("Tai Chugoku" 2021) arising from the US-Japan Status of Forces Agreement (MOFA 1960) are less known among them.[3]

For example, Irisuna Island was used as a symbol of imaginary southern paradise in a popular TV drama series called *Churasan*[4] (NHK 2001) (Figure 2) in the context of a so-called "Okinawa Boom" that has flooded Japanese popular culture and mass media since the mid-1980s or 1990s (Ina 2010; Murray 2017). However, it is hardly known (except among residents of the adjacent Tonaki Island) that Irisuna Island has been heavily used as a US Rifle Range following WWII (Figure 3). For the residents of Tonaki Island, Irisuna Island is an irreplaceable place that has sacred groves (see Figure 5, *utaki*).

Here, a repercussion of Japanese imperialism is identifiable. Inoue (2012) illustrated that pre-WWII colonial discourses were pervasive to the extent that they permeated into children's literature of the time. Kawamura (1992 as cited in Inoue 2012) exemplified a

[1] Ryukyuan languages belong to the Japonic language family alongside Japanese language (Pellard 2015).

[2] The name *Ryukyu* (琉球: Lewchew) was given by the Xuande Emperor of the Ming dynasty in 1430 (Lim 2016). I use the Japanese reading *Ryukyu* for the time being, following the current academic convention.

[3] I would like to thank community people for their insights, my PhD supervisors and colleagues for their support and guidance, and CHASE AHRC Studentship and *Gesellschaft für bedrohte Sprachen* project for funding my research.

[4] *Churasan* means 'pure' in Okinawa language.

novel about a Japanese boy's adventures on an exotic South Sea Island with the colonialist dichotomy of *civilization* versus *barbarism*. A similar configuration is still observable among contemporary tourists or immigrants who visit or relocate to the Ryukyu Islands (Sudo 2016).

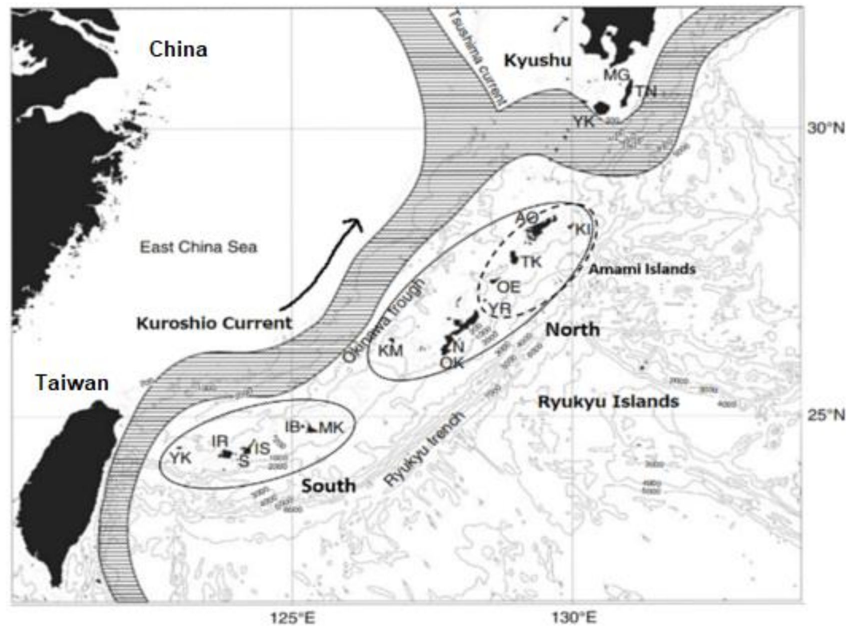

Figure 1. The Ryukyu Islands (adapted from Kan 2011).

Figure 2. A distant view of Irisuna Island that was used in the opening of the drama *Churasan* (adapted from Tonaki jima nikki 2013).

Figure 3. A US helicopter shooting rockets into Irisuna Island (adapted from 1st MAW Marines 2021). A link to the original video is available from the reference list.

2. The purpose of the research

The Indigenous territory of the Ryukyus is politically divided into Kagoshima and Okinawa Prefectures, which correspond to the geographic areas subdued by the Satsuma Clan from Japan in the early 17th century (the Amami Islands) and annexed to Japan in the late 19th century (the rest of the Ryukyus), respectively. On the other hand, the same territory is linguistically classified into the Northern and Southern regions, where Amami, Kunigami and Okinawa languages, and Miyako, Yaeyama and Yonaguni languages[5] are spoken respectively (Heinrich, Miyara and Shimoji 2015). Each language is spoken in a region of the same name except the Kunigami language which is spoken across a part of the Amami Islands and the northern end of Okinawa Prefecture. The narrow (Okinawa region) and broad (Okinawa Prefecture) definitions of Okinawa often create confusion between different contexts, such as identity and political discussions.

Following the assimilation policy imposed by the Meiji government of Imperial Japan as part of the Rich Nation, Strong Army campaign in the first half of the 20th century (Samuels 1994; Kondo 2014) and the subsequent internalised assimilation under the post-war US occupation (Masiko 2014), the Ryukyuan people have given up transmitting their mother tongue to younger generations. My impression is that, most traditional speakers are over eighty at the time of writing. According to Yokoyama (Yamada et al. 2018; Yokoyama and Kagomiya 2019), language comprehension seems maintained among people in their 40s and older but rapidly reduces among people under 40.

Despite the current language revitalisation efforts in the Ryukyus, new speakers[6] have not increased effectively. Prior to the fieldwork, I assumed that one of the main causes was that the efforts mainly focused on the cognitive aspect of language learning. However, as Swain (2013) emphasised, emotional and cognitive aspects of language learning are inseparable. Another cause seemed to be that they mainly targeted children at school (Okinawa Prefecture 2020). However, as Fishman (1991) identified, intergenerational language transmission mainly occurs in an immersive environment at home and in the community. In order to recreate such an environment, we need to fill the gap of *missing generations* between children and traditional speakers (Hinton and Meek 2018).

In the following subsections, I introduce my positionality and research questions, and discuss the implications of the research.

2.1. The author's positionality

I am an Indigenous[7] Ryukyuan researcher originally from the Okinawa region, which has been the political centre of both the former Ryukyu Kingdom and the current Okinawa

[5] The Ryukyuan languages have a few hundred 'regional lects' in total that correspond to their traditional community units (see Figure 5). I use 'regional lect' as a substitute for 'dialect' for the time being to eliminate the negative connotation associated with the term as a dialect of Japanese language (Clarke 2015). I use the Japanese readings for the region and language names for the same reason as in Footnote 2 and to avoid issues of power relations within Ryukyuan society by applying a reading in a specific regional lect, among others.

[6] Here, 'new speakers' means people who had little home or community exposure to the target endangered language but have acquired it through language revitalisation efforts (O'Rourke, Pujolar and Ramallo 2015).

[7] When the word 'Indigenous' is capitalised, it does not simply indicate that Indigenous peoples have unique history and relationship with their lands, territories and resources, but also that they are marginalised

Prefecture of Japan. I had an assimilated Japanese identity and a monolithic view on diverse Ryukyuan communities until I started my PhD research. I first joined the SOAS community as a master's student to get qualified as a Japanese language teacher to help heritage Japanese speakers, including my son. However, when I was reminded by linguists that I had my own ancestral tongue and it was endangered, I realised that anxiety and fear that I constantly had were deeply connected to the issue (Zlazli, forthcoming). This experience led me to the current research on language revitalisation of Ryukyuan languages to resolve emotional insecurity of the Ryukyuan people and help them recover agency in their life.

> "Indigenous language revitalizes us, not the other way around. If we take care of our language, it will take care of us. This is our wellbeing." (Galla and Goodwill 2017)

2.2. Research questions

To fill the gap of missing generations between children and traditional speakers, I explore:

(i) What motivates adult new speakers to speak Ryukyuan languages?

(ii) How can they effectively acquire Ryukyuan languages without compromising the diversity of Ryukyuan languages?

2.3. Implications of the research

The main stakeholders of current language revitalisation efforts, to my knowledge, are grassroots traditional speakers or communities (Anderson 2014; Hammine 2020b) and the Okinawa Prefecture, which does not have jurisdiction over the Amami Islands (Ishihara et al. 2019; Okinawa Prefecture 2020). In limited regions, grassroots new speakers (Sakihara and Oyakawa 2021; Okinawa Hands-On NPO, n.d.; Zlazli 2021) and grassroots researchers (Tohyama 2019; Matsuda and van der Lubbe 2020; Port Language Revitalization Project 2020; Yokoyama 2021) also actively engage in local language revitalisation efforts.

Given that language revitalisation is a newly emerged discipline that requires more empirical research and theorisation, collaboration between Indigenous peoples and academic researchers from a range of related disciplines is indispensable. However, community-researcher and interdisciplinary collaborations are not fully established in the Ryukyuan context due to mismatch between "well-defined short-term goals" by different stakeholders and "ill-defined long-term goals" as holistic language revitalisation (Madsen 2021).

Given that new speakers are the essential actors to maintain the language use in society (Hammine 2020a; Zlazli 2021), reframing language revitalisation efforts from their perspectives may have a potential to achieve: (i) the necessary collaboration among stakeholders with agreed long-term goals, and (ii) consensus of "ideological clarification" on what language revitalisation means (Kroskrity 2009; Heinrich 2011; Heinrich and Ishihara 2017).

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in the mainstream of society (Johnson et al. 2007; UNDESA 2008). This notion has been developed in the historical context of settler colonialism as an international political category to seek for a higher authority beyond a nation to address their human rights issues (Merlan 2009).

3. The research design

Guba and Lincoln (Guba, Lincoln and Lynham 2017) identified that any researchers, whether knowingly or unknowingly, have a certain philosophical assumption on their axiology (what they value), ontology (how they view the nature of a reality or realities), epistemology (how they engage with the reality/realities), and methodology and methods (how they conduct research on the reality/realities). Therefore, it is crucial to examine whether the philosophical assumption that underpins the research paradigm (Figure 4) is coherent with the nature of the research questions. Otherwise, we could face a risk of having unreliable findings or an unethical research process.

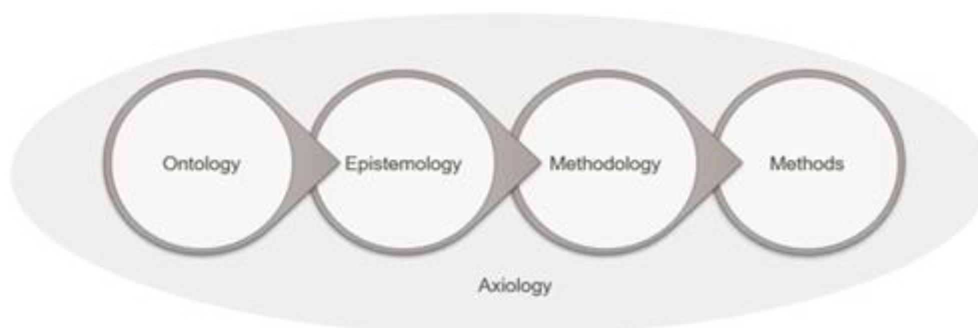

Figure 4. Elements of research paradigm.

3.1. Indigenous transformative paradigm

In the current research, I employ an Indigenous transformative paradigm based on Mertens' transformative approach (Widianingsih and Mertens 2019) and Wilson's (2008: 62) Indigenous research paradigm. It consists of the following elements.

Axiology: *Relational accountability* (Wilson 2008: 97) is of the utmost importance between: (i) stakeholders of language revitalisation efforts to prevent potential harm to those who are vulnerable in power relations,[8] and (ii) living people, the Indigenous land and sea, and ancestors and spiritual beings to appreciate the Indigenous knowledge system. An Indigenous knowledge system can be understood as a holistic system of knowledge that has developed over many generations through a complex fabric of practices and understandings in the corresponding Indigenous communities (Howden 2001).

Ontology: Voices of Indigenous peoples are marginalised in mainstream society (Johnson et al. 2007; UNDESA 2008), such as those of the Ryukyuan people in Japan. Layers of similar power relations are also observable between Okinawa and other Ryukyuan regions and between larger and smaller communities in the respective regions. As is the case with other Indigenous peoples (e.g., Henry and Pene 2001; Chilisa et al. 2016), the Ryukyuan people also have close-knit ties of kinship and relations (i) within their traditional community units that are uniquely situated on their Indigenous land and sea (Figure 5) and (ii) with their ancestors and spiritual beings to form a unique cosmological construction (Abe 2016).

[8] A same person can be both dominant and vulnerable in different aspects of power relations, e.g., Indigenous Okinawans are dominant to people from other regions of the Ryukyus, and non-Indigenous researchers can be vulnerable if they are women or in the early stage of their career.

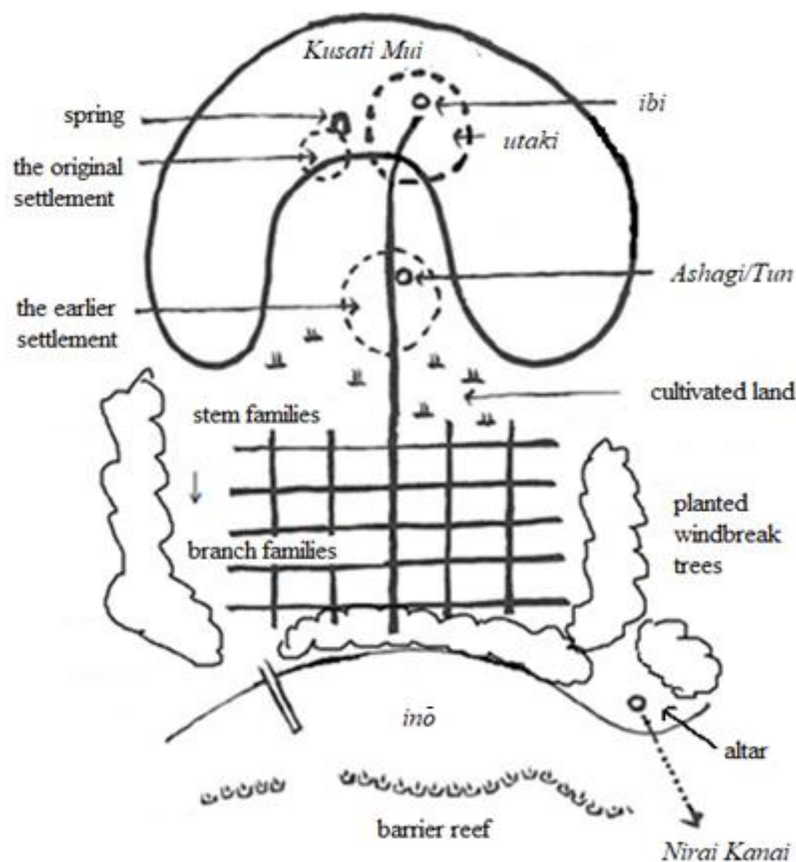

Figure 5. A traditional community unit in the Ryukyus (Adapted from Architectural Institute of Japan [1989] in Tomigusuku City 2020). *Kusati Mui*: Cuddling Forest, *utaki*: sacred grove, *ibi*: sanctuary, *Ashagi/Tun*: Worship House, *Nirai Kanai*: the Everlasting World, *inō*: coral reef lagoon.[9]

Epistemology: Researchers have the responsibility of *Primum non nocere* [First, do no harm] to the Indigenous communities through rigorous iterative reflection on their own positionalities (Manohar, Bhole and Arora 2017) (Table 1). Therefore, they are expected to identify marginalised voices of stakeholders, which are often invisible[10] to those in a dominant position and incorporate their voices into the language revitalisation efforts and future language planning. They are also expected to be aware of how they are positioned in the Indigenous knowledge system.

[9] The Cuddling Forest surrounds the community like Mother to protect it from typhoons in summer and north winds in winter alongside planted windbreak trees. The forest has a sacred grove (which has a sanctuary where their guardian deity descends and only priestesses are allowed to enter) and burial site where their ancestors rest. They believe the existence of the Everlasting World far off the coast to the south-east. It is the origin of all life, and life is eternal there. The forest, the coral reef lagoon, and the cultivated land provide resources to the community.

[10] Gohard-Radenkovic (2012) describes the state as *zone blanche*, which will be hidden or masked by *untold* or *overtold* stories. Indigenous people also feel difficult to speak their mind freely within their communities due to their close-knit complex relations.

Table 1: A checklist for researcher's positionality (partially adapted from Lin 2015; Manohar, Bhole and Arora 2017).

1. What kinds of interest motivate you to do research?
2. What kind of knowledge will you produce?
   2.1 What is the possible impact of the knowledge, and for whom?
   2.2 How will data be collected and disseminated?
   2.3 Who has the agency on the research process?
3. Is there any value- or interest-free research? Why/Why not?
4. What is your relationship with other stakeholders?
   4.1 How do you view yourself (e.g., political allegiance, religious faith, gender, sexuality, geographical location, race, culture, ethnicity, social class, age, linguistic tradition, personal experience)?
   4.2 How do you position other stakeholders, and vice versa?
   4.3 What possible impact does your personal position have on other stakeholders and the research context and process?
5. How are you positioned in the Indigenous knowledge system?

Methodology and Methods: With the abovementioned philosophical assumption, I conduct collaborative autoethnography (Chang, Ngunjiri and Hernandez 2016: 17) with stakeholders of language revitalisation to unearth marginalised voices among them[8] and incorporate the voices into future action plans to eliminate power disparities. The research process is expected to agree with Indigenous ways of living to keep harmony with both Indigenous peoples and their ancestors and spiritual beings.

3.2. MAI-Ryukyus project

Based on the research questions and the Indigenous transformative paradigm, I designed a participatory action research project MAI-Ryukyus (Figure 6) with reference to Hinton's Master/Mentor-Apprentice Language Learning Program (Hinton et al. 2018). MAI stands for Master/Mentor-Apprentice Initiative. In this project, adult new speakers (equivalent to "Apprentice" in Hinton's program) are widely recruited online. They are mainly self-identified Ryukyuans including myself, but other people are also welcome if they are interested in the Ryukyuan people, not only their languages, to prevent cultural appropriation. They will take initiative to spend time with traditional speakers ('Master/Mentor') in daily life settings or online to elicit an immersive environment of their target Ryukyuan language to acquire it. They have access to a peer support network like *Thirdspace* (Soja 1996) to explore their new language practice and pluralistic identity (Ting-Toomey 2015). They will also receive specialist support as required (e.g., introductory sessions to practice Master/Mentor-Apprentice interactions and learn how to use existing linguistic resources). New speakers are also encouraged to take initiative in wider language revitalisation efforts as they come up with new ideas.

I have been documenting the trajectories of new speaker participants' language acquisition[11] since the summer of 2019. As positive and negative outcomes surface one after another, we (new speakers and I) analyse the causes and explore better practices

[11] Austin and Sallabank (2018; Austin 2020) argue the importance of documenting the process of language revitalisation efforts, e.g., decision-making, events, success, and failure, so that other people can learn from the experience.

through iterative trials and errors. I plan to theorise effective approaches to language learning in the Master/Mentor-Apprentice approach at the end of the PhD project.

The findings of this research will be discussed in a future article. In this paper, I discuss issues identified in the current language revitalisation efforts through ethnographic observation and conclude with future directions.

Figure 6. MAI-Ryukyus project.

4. Current issues

The most prominent issue identified in the current language revitalisation efforts during my fieldwork was a controversial attempt to promote language revitalisation while waiting for the completion of cultural assimilation because most efforts have not addressed the ongoing impact of internalised assimilation on traditional speakers and new speakers of Ryukyuan languages, which has been the very reason of their language shift.

Paradigmatic issues were also identified on a personal level. Most stakeholders, including myself, seem to remain on the subjective perspective (Figure 7), with which we are prone to react without considering relations that we are embedded in. It has been causing deadlocks that prevent us from collaboration among stakeholders. I argue that we need more awareness-building dialogues among ourselves based on active listening of other parties and sharing honest opinions (Hạnh 2013) to gain the relative perspective underpinned by careful examination of our positionalities (Table 1). From there, we can explore the transformative perspective to comply with relational accountability in the Indigenous transformative paradigm. Tolerant dialogues over an extended period of time might be needed because paradigm shift is often out of one's comfort zone (Marcum 2013).

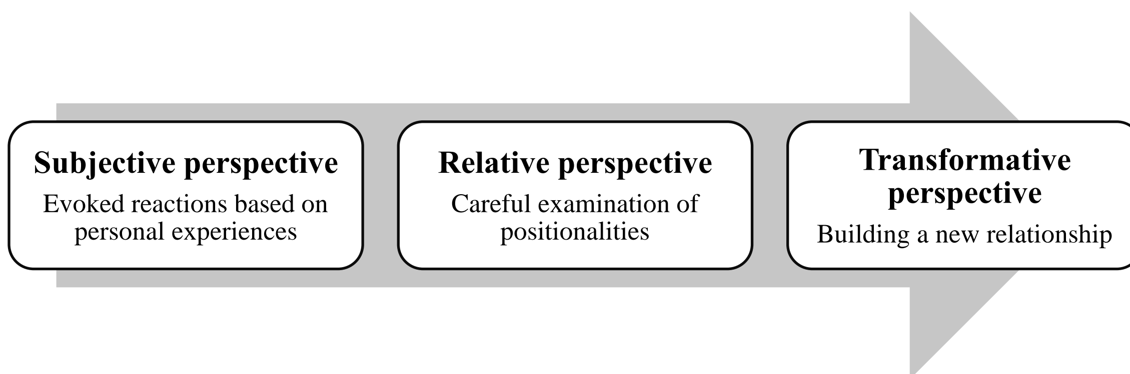

Figure 7. A required paradigm shift on a personal level.

4.1. Unconscious bias in Japan

In order to discuss the internalised assimilation of the Ryukyuan people, we first need to address their Indigenous rights (UN 2017).[12] However, such discussions tend to be avoided as being politically sensitive among many researchers who work with the Ryukyuan people in Japan (personal communications, 2019-2020):

> Researcher 1 (Japanese):
> "As a team, we conduct both language documentation and language revitalisation … When I interact with community people, I often call their language as 'dialect' because they call their own language as a 'dialect' [of Japanese]. As a linguist, I also use the term 'dialect' as a dialect of a specific Ryukyuan language. I try not to get involved in the political discussion [of the term 'dialect'] because it is a sensitive problem. I respect the decision of the community people."
>
> Researcher 2 (Japanese):
> "I wondered if you [the author] were Japanese or not because your family name was foreign, and you wore a [Muslim] headscarf. … Isn't it quicker to just begin [teaching the community people how to learn and document their Ryukyuan languages] rather than having disputes over political issues?"
>
> Researcher 3 (Ryukyuan):
> "When I was a graduate student, I got hurt when a person who studied abroad criticized me for not calling our ancestral tongue as 'language' and criticized that I was poisoned by the way of thinking in the mainland Japan. Now I try to express the complexity of my suffering somehow, thinking that it's okay to have a marginalised anguish because research could be a means of artistic expressions like poetry."

Researcher 1 had a positivist assumption that he could be politically neutral (Rubin and Rubin 2011: 16) in his relationship with the community people, while Researcher 2 ideologically contested if I (Indigenous Ryukyuan) would satisfy her homogeneous

[12] The Ryukyuan people satisfy the definition of Indigenous peoples (UNDESA 2008: 8), but the Japanese government does not recognise them to be Indigenous people (Japanese Language Division of the Agency for Cultural Affairs, personal communication, March 2019).

expectation of being Japanese (Sugimoto, 2019). Such practices as a person in a dominant position both as a researcher and a Japanese person may potentially prolong the assimilative impact on the Ryukyuan people, but both of them were not aware of it.[13] On the other hand, Researcher 3 expressed her struggles with mismatch between being Indigenous and her familiar research practices in Japan.

Imposing assimilative pressure on Indigenous persons supresses their ancestral tongue under the state of *diglossia* (Maher 2019), which is counter-effective to language revitalisation (A in Figure 8). As the notion of "Indigenous peoples" has been developed as an international political category to seek for a higher authority beyond nations to claim their neglected collective rights (Merlan 2009), the knowledge system of Indigenous communities should be acknowledged as being well beyond the system within the assimilative national ideology (Sugimoto, 2019). In this way, non-hierarchical translanguaging (Li Wei 2018) and negotiation of pluralistic identity (Ting-Toomey 2015) become possible, which works in favour with language revitalisation (Zlazli, forthcoming) (B in Figure 8).

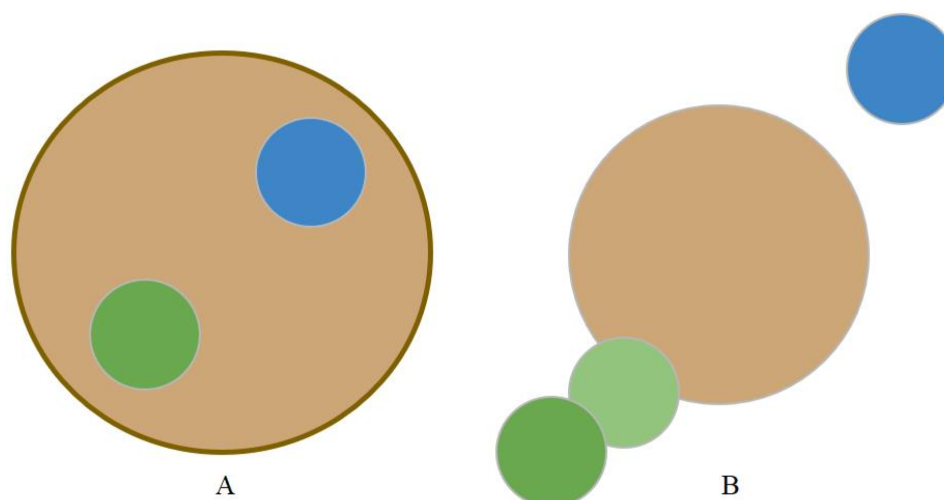

Figure 8. Perspectives within (A) and beyond (B) the homogeneous national ideology in Japan. A: Under an exclusive and assimilative ideology (Sugimoto 2019), the use of minority languages including Indigenous languages will be supressed under the state of *diglossia* (Maher 2019). B: By acknowledging that the knowledge system of the minority-language-speaking communities is well beyond the system within the assimilative ideology, non-hierarchical translanguaging (Li Wei 2018) and negotiation of pluralistic identity (Ting-Toomey 2015) become possible.

A similar power relation was observed with the author's positionality. Prior to the fieldwork, I conceived an idea that I was an Indigenous Ryukyuan person from the literature review during my MPhil period. Carrying the attitude that we are the *same* Ryukyuan people as a dominant Okinawan person exerted unexpected assimilation

[13] They have significantly contributed to the communities who they have worked with for more than a decade (Shimoji 2020). I have not had opportunities to conduct ethnographic research within their communities due to the pandemic of COVID-19. Therefore, the discussion is limited to my impression as an Indigenous person and based on feedback from collaborative autoethnography with Ryukyuan people from several other regions.

pressure on Ryukyuan people from other regions. An Indigenous researcher from another Ryukyuan region once warned me that I was potentially breaching research ethics, but it took her more than a year to speak it up to me. I realised how difficult it could be for marginalised stakeholders to disclose their concerns and for researchers to identify their own unconscious bias. In order to create a safe space where community people feel more comfortable to express their voices, researchers should carefully reflect on their own positionality (Table 1).[14]

In contrast, Indigenous new speakers who were motivated to learn Ryukyuan languages *for themselves* beyond communicative needs in the workplace or care homes *for traditional speakers* had a rediscovered Ryukyuan identity or a regional identity distinct from other regions (interview data, 2020-2021):

> New Speaker 1 (Yaeyama language, early-20s):
> "I used to want to leave the small islands where I grew up to see the world. Then, I had frequent opportunities to look at my home islands from outside through such as internship and volunteering in Southeast Asian countries and the Loochoo[15] Identity Summit in Hawai'i, which made me realise the significance of my own roots. In parallel, I was seriously concerned when I learned at university that our history and culture were about to be eliminated by colonialism.[16] These motivated me to learn Yaeyama language, especially my family's regional lect."[5]
>
> New Speaker 2 (Miyako language, early-20s):
> "I used to try to reduce my accent in Japanese to sound like a Tokyoite when I was in secondary school in Miyako. Now, I read history at university in Tokyo. At the university library, I found books authored by Ryukyuan scholars. I read them through and got intrigued. I also had opportunities to meet researchers including an anthropologist who conducted fieldwork in my own community. While I had to stay on my home island during the last academic year due to the pandemic, I had a chance to experience a compilation work of community people's life, rituals, and memories as a member of our community's 300th anniversary committee. I realise that our traditional practices are on the verge of disappearance due to marginalisation caused by layers of power relations in Miyako, the Ryukyus, and Japan. Alongside our culture and history, our regional lect[5] in Miyako is also precious to me now."

[14] Madoka Hammine (personal communication, August 2021) observed the importance of researcher-community collaboration in revitalisation efforts in other Indigenous languages communities, in which being aware of one's own positionality was a prerequisite.
[15] Another reading for 'Ryukyu' chosen by some Ryukyuan people.
[16] Ono (2015) argues that Okinawan protesters have criticised the current Japanese political system as domestic colonialism in search of a breakthrough for political reform.

New Speaker 3 (Kunigami language, late-20s):
"Although I couldn't clearly grasp the meaning and I was not particularly interested in the language, I'd had opportunities to hear the Northern Okinawan language[17] since my childhood such as in conversations between relatives. I loved local events, place names, and Okinawan culture in general. Later in my life, I was inspired by a novel written by Shun Medoruma, in which he incorporated the Northern Okinawan language to characters' speech lines. I felt a strong attachment to the Northern Okinawan lines while I wasn't really moved by materials written in Shuri/Naha Okinawan language.[18] It urged me to relearn the language I'd known since I was young."

New Speaker 4 (Okinawa language, mid-40s):
"I was brought up in the Okinawan diaspora in Osaka, Japan. I had many classmates with Okinawan roots. We actively performed Okinawan traditional performances at festivals held by a neighbourhood association. We even had our original design of *Paarankuu*[19] [Okinawan hand-held drum] cut out of *Wadaiko* [Japanese drum] because we didn't have easy access to original ones from Okinawa at that time. So, it's kind of iconic to our diaspora.

When I moved to a different place for university, I felt different from others. I felt culturally appropriated when *Okinawa Boom* hit mainland Japan. I also had inner conflicts, feeling powerless about Japanese people's apathy to the way contradictions in Okinawa were broadcast in Japan (such as a campaign against the US Futenma base following the 1995 Okinawa rape incident by US servicemen; a new US Henoko base construction under the name of US Futenma base removal; and the 2004 US military helicopter crash at Okinawa International University).

I was inspired by authors and activists who addressed these issues, and I realised that I should also be the one to change the situation, not someone else. Later in my life, I started performance arts alongside work to explore what I can do, and I am further inspired by other performance artists from across the world. I want to speak Okinawan because it's also my language."

4.2. Ryukyuan identity

Due to the assimilative ideology justified by social evolutionist discourses developed in the context of Japanese imperialism (Meyer 2007; Heinrich 2012; Inoue 2012), the Ryukyuan people have had emotional insecurity with their own identity (Zlazli, forthcoming). They also lack a unified Ryukyuan identity and attribute themselves to layers of smaller social groups with corresponding vernacular language practices. There is a sense of rivalry among groups, on which political division into Kagoshima and Okinawa Prefectures also casts a shadow (Kiyama 2008). Due to layers of complex power

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[17] "The Northern Okinawan language" indicates Kunigami language.
[18] Shuri/Naha lect is a regional lect spoken in the political centre of the Ryukyus. Shuri lect was also a sociolect spoken by aristocrats and royals in the former Ryukyu Kingdom.
[19] The origin of *Paarankuu* is said to be Octagonal Drum (八角鼓) which was brought from China (Lim 2016; *Ryukyu Shimpo* 2003) during the Ryukyu Kingdom era.

relations, the Ryukyuan people struggle to come to a consensus on being a unified Indigenous people who are entitled to claim their Indigenous rights (UN 2017).[20]

The Japanese government uses a rhetoric that they cannot force the Ryukyuan people to be Indigenous while they are voluntarily assimilated to Japan without acknowledging their historical responsibility.[21] This attitude also coincides with Researcher 1's attitude (see Section 4.1). While we are asleep, we are missing the opportunity to seek a higher authority *beyond the nation* to claim our rights that we have been fighting for *within the nation*'s framework (Inoue 2004; Nakashima 2010) or to convince external researchers to support our Indigenous rights.

The fact that we lack representative bodies of the Ryukyuan people also contributes to Okinocentrism. People from Okinawa region generally use "Okinawa" and "the Ryukyus" interchangeably and often forget the existence of the Amami Islands in Kagoshima Prefecture, while Ryukyuan people from other regions clearly distinguish Okinawa from the other Ryukyuan regions. For example, Okinawa independence movements under the name of "the Ryukyus" (Ginoza 2015) are often criticised for their self-serving agendas that do not represent voices of other Ryukyuan regions (community people, personal communications, 2019-2021). In terms of Ryukyuan languages, some activists have attempted sole promotion of Okinawa language over other Ryukyuan languages and standardisation of Okinawa language based on Shuri/Naha lect[18] for the sake of economic efficiency (Sato 2020). However, as seen in the interviews of new speakers (see Section 4.1), the diversity of the Ryukyuan languages should not be actively compromised. Otherwise, such a language policy will impact on people from other Ryukyuan regions as double assimilation to Japan and Okinawa.

In addition to the diversity within the Ryukyus, we also have diverse Ryukyuan diasporas across the world[22] (Kondo 2014; Maeda 2014; Yomitan Village History Editing Room 2021) and mix-roots people who self-identify as Ryukyuan. Along with the fact that the Ryukyuan knowledge system is gradually disappearing due to the ongoing assimilation to Japan or mainstream societies where Ryukyuan diasporas are embedded in, negotiating contingent pluralistic identity may help the Ryukyuan people to realise a new efflorescent Ryukyuan society (Roche, Maruyama, and Virdi Kroik 2018; Zlazli, forthcoming), which may provide opportunities to create new social domains for using Ryukyuan languages.

[20] Vasiliki Vita (personal communication, July 2021) argues that groups of people who have certain similarities do not necessarily need to be grouped under a unified identity, which could be an internalised ideology that should be unlearned because it relates back to a vicious circle of an oppression setting, such as the Japanese state promoting the Ryukyuan people's voluntary assimilation to Japan. I agree with her point because in fact the Ryukyuan people, who I call so collectively, have never been unified except being ruled under the former Ryukyu Kingdom for different periods of time at slightly different times. I have had a decentralised vision of the unified Ryukyuan people's network (B in Figure 9) (Section 5), but I should explore what community people potentially wish for their future.

[21] Choi (2003) argues that Japan's impunity for negating its historical imperialism is supported by Western industrialised nations for the current economic benefits.

[22] In statistical data, they are often classified as Japanese or citizens of Okinawa or Kagoshima Prefecture because mass emigration began following the annexation to Japan or the abolition of feudal domains and establishment of prefectures.

4.3. Linguistic fieldwork and language revitalisation

Most linguists who work with the Ryukyuan people were mainly trained in Japanese research institutions which provide only linguistic fieldwork trainings (NINJAL 2016; ILCAA 2021) without giving considerations on researcher's positionality (Table 1) or Indigenous research paradigm (Wilson 2008).

In traditional academic discourses in Japan, a social evolutionist belief was pervasive among researchers who worked with Indigenous peoples (Ikeda 2020; Rots 2019). While the use of Ryukyuan languages across social domains had rapidly declined under the policy of progressive assimilation, self-serving linguists extensively collected linguistic data across the whole of the Ryukyu Islands, with their own version of justification in terms of "community causes", i.e., creation of "comprehensive" linguistics resources for future generations of descendants of the current speakers who might be ready to utilise them in some unspecified way (Karimata 2003). Their agenda also brought with it a *fly-in-fly-out* method and attitude (Austin 2013; Hokuto City Library 1998) which has made community people feel that their knowledge was being culturally appropriated and led them to be wary of researchers (community people, personal communications, 2019 to 2021).

Leonard (2018) argues the importance of decolonization in language documentation, and Austin (2020) and Bowern (2011) emphasise careful consideration on designing a language documentation project to meet the community's expectations. Now, the global knowledge in this area is accumulating (e.g., Cruz and Woodbury 2014; Fitzgerald 2018; 2020; Genee and Junker 2018). However, along with researchers from the Global South (Sanders 2020), I argue that many researchers in Japan (including myself until recently) struggle to keep updated with the latest global discussions, partially due to their negative attitude towards the hegemony of English across the Global North (Ning 1997; Macedo, Dendrinos and Gounari 2016).

In contrast, they did not question the notion of selecting Japanese over other languages that minority language communities comprehend in the creation of bilingual resources, whether they be languages spoken in Japan or elsewhere.[23] This could also be the case with bilingual resources of Ryukyuan languages for non-Japanese speaking Ryukyuan people, e.g., Ryukyuan diasporas.

There are researchers in the early stages of their careers who have concerns over traditional practice, but they struggle to make themselves heard in the mainstream of practice due to rigid, gendered, hierarchical human resource management systems in Japanese society (Froese, Sekiguchi and Maharjan 2018).

4.4. Emotional resistance

I wrote that a paradigm shift is often out of one's comfort zone (see Section 4). Even if a person rationally understands its importance, implementing it could be emotionally

[23] Researchers at ILCAA (Tokyo University of Foreign Studies) are typical for adopting this view, e.g., they published a bilingual dictionary of the Chinese minority language Eynu with glosses only in Japanese and a large two-volume Mon-Japanese dictionary written entirely in Mon script (with no phonetic representation) so that only people literate in Mon AND Japanese would be able to use the work (Peter Austin, personal communication, April 2021).

challenging if the person struggles to overcome an associated psychological pain. Therefore, we need tolerant dialogues to emancipate psychological pain or trauma of stakeholders alongside those of traditional and new speakers of Ryukyuan languages.

For example, I often struggle to admit my positionality in a complex social network of stakeholders. I once overreacted to an external researcher who had a longstanding researcher-community collaboration in one Ryukyuan region when she called me an outsider to the community. While I believe that she should not have called the Indigenous person as an outsider on behalf of the community people, my reaction was mainly triggered by my family's psychological trauma of ostracism as minority Christians from our local community (Zlazli, forthcoming).

Researcher 2 (see Section 4.1) also struggles to start examining her own positionality because she fears that her decadelong hard work in the field (e.g., investing a significant amount of her own money, effort and time, building the researcher-community collaboration from the scratch, her passion devoted in the creation of a reference grammar which did not exist before, and so on) might be cancelled to be null by "beautifully theorised arguments" by a person who does not know the trajectory of her work once she admits that she is an external researcher.

On the other hand, I also witnessed some community people whose psychological trauma was topped up with abhorrence against researchers that was induced by sociologists' criticism on traditional practices of linguistic fieldwork mentioned above in Japan. When disseminating research findings, we need careful consideration of the topic, its depth, and the pitch so that the discourse can promote prospective community-researcher collaborations.

5. Future directions

On completion of my PhD research, I plan to establish a non-governmental organisation based on the MAI-Ryukyus project to provide long-term coherent language planning support, including promotion of researcher-community collaboration and creation of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) on Indigenous knowledge system with a multidisciplinary team.[24] The organisation might also function as a representative body of the Ryukyuan people in future (B in Figure 9).[20] As the Māori people have established their own research paradigm (Bishop 1998; *Rangahau*, n.d.), I am also interested in exploring a Ryukyuan research paradigm to develop a more suitable research methodology for the Ryukyuan people based on the Indigenous transformative paradigm (Section 3.1).

While descriptive linguists collect and elicit empirical linguistic data to create comprehensive reference grammars of Ryukyuan languages *as a system* (Dixon 2010; Aikhenvald 2014) and build centralised comprehensive digital dictionaries (Carlino and Shimoji 2021), new speakers can also contribute to language documentation by accumulating discourses of Ryukyuan languages *as a practice* (Austin and Sallabank 2018; Heinrich 2018).

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[24] The MOOCs on Indigenous knowledge system can be incorporated into the existing framework of *Shimakutuba Kentei* [Community language examinations] provided by the Shimakutuba Fukyu Center (2018), Okinawa Prefecture.

If community-researcher collaboration is carefully designed based on the Indigenous transformative paradigm, such a symbiotic collaboration may bring a bottom-up transformative experience to both parties who will coevolve for mutual benefit (Viswanathan et al. 2021) to create comprehensive linguistic resources for future generations. Such collaboration may also advocate for Indigenous peoples to become Peoples, lessen the current dichotomous *insider/outsider* conflicts to embrace *stakeholder spectrum with different positionalities* who are embedded in a flexible distributed network in language revitalisation (C in Figure 9) while maintaining the cosmos of traditional community units (A in Figure 9). Each stakeholder from a different background will bring a unique perspective to language revitalisation efforts in a specific community, and the efforts will provide a unique insight back to the stakeholder who can reflect it to their relationship with their community of origin.

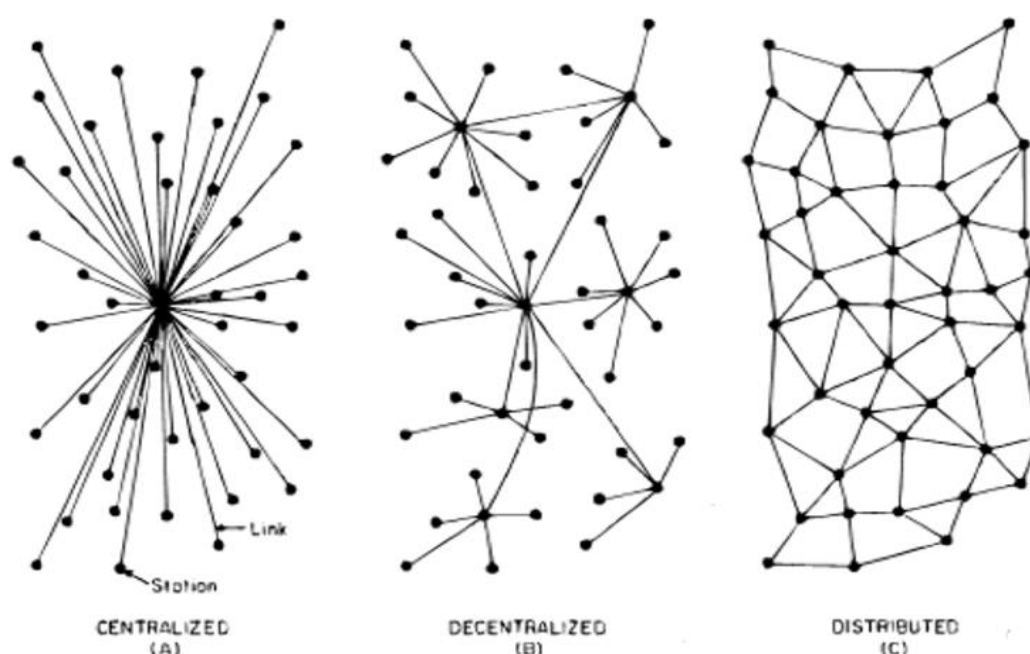

Figure 9. The configuration of traditional community units (A); representative bodies of the Ryukyuan people (B);[20] and stakeholders of language revitalisation efforts (C) (adapted from Liacas 2019).

6. Conclusion

In this article, I first introduced my PhD research project MAI-Ryukyus which is designed based on Hinton's Master/Mentor-Apprentice Language Learning Program, and discussed issues identified in the current language revitalisation efforts through ethnographic observation. The most prominent issue was a controversial attempt to promote language revitalisation while waiting for the completion of cultural assimilation. Paradigmatic issues were also identified on a personal level, which prohibited effective collaboration among stakeholders based on relational accountability and the Indigenous transformative paradigm. The author plans to establish a non-governmental organisation based on the MAI-Ryukyus project to provide long-term coherent language planning support.

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