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## REVIEWS

**Aleksandra Jarosz**Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toruń  
aljarosz@umk.pl

Okinawa Daigaku Chiiki Kenkyūjo (ed.) 2013. *Ryūkyū shogo-no fukkō* [restoration of Ryukyuan languages]. Tokyo: Fuyō Shobō.

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“Ryukyuan languages” is a relatively new concept in Japanese studies. Traditional ethnolects spoken in the area of the former Ryukyu Kingdom, which comprises the present-day Okinawa Prefecture and Amami islands in Kagoshima Prefecture, have been incorporated into the framework of Japanese dialectology since 1920s (precisely Tōjō 1927) at the latest, both their mutual unintelligibility and unintelligibility with mainland Japanese notwithstanding. It is only in the past twenty years that the status of Ryukyuan ethnolects as separate languages has gradually begun to be acknowledged by linguists. As a consequence, Ryukyuan linguistics still suffers from a number of shortcomings, both theoretical, e.g. a lack of consensus in identifying how many Ryukyuan languages actually are there and what are their areas, and practical, such as the lack of reference books that would introduce a student to the field.

The publication under review is one attempt to cope with the insufficiency of literature on Ryukyuan languages. In a way it is a response to the UNESCO announcement from February 19, 2009, whereby the third edition of its *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* (Moseley 2010) acknowledged the existence of eight endangered languages in Japan, among which six were Ryukyuan. No source prior to the *Atlas* had communicated Ryukyuan linguistic diversity so explicitly. Consequently, it led to a much greater awareness of the linguistic situation of the area worldwide. It also elicited a reaction among Japanese academics and language activists; the authority of a classification by UNESCO helped, even if just a little, to shift a general Japanese notion of Ryukyuan from “mere dialects of Japanese” to “independent languages in their own right”, allowing for those involved in documentation and revitalization work on Ryukyuan to disseminate its results more efficiently. *Restoration of Ryukyuan Languages* is one such result. A product of the collective effort of specialists on Ryukyuan languages and culture, it can be well considered the first synthetic reference book on Ryukyuan languages ever. Even its title, containing the element “Ryukyuan languages” (Japanese *Ryūkyū shogo* 琉球諸語), is very telling, putting the emphasis on the plurality of Ryukyuan ethnolects while fighting off the widespread misconception that there is such

a thing as a single, unified “Ryukyuan language” (usually identified with the Okinawan variety of Shuri-Naha, which used to be the language of the court in the times of the Ryukyu Kingdom, and at the same time a sort of *lingua franca* of the area).

The book is divided into three major parts. Part One, entitled *The Outline of Ryukyuan Languages* (*Ryūkyū shogo gaisetsu* 琉球諸語概説), contains an introductory chapter on Ryukyuan linguistics, language endangerment and revitalization efforts, followed by six chapters devoted to each language as identified by UNESCO, written by specialists on the respective languages: Amami (Yūto Niinaga), Kunigami (Satoshi Nishioka), Okinawan (Satoshi Nishioka), Miyakoan (Hayato Aoi), Yaeyaman (Jō Nakahara) and Yonaguni (Atsuko Izuyama). Specific chapters tend to vary in terms of content (see also below), but most of them focus on the following aspects of language description: unusual or representative features in phonological and morphological systems, regional diversity, and sociolinguistic situation. The question of the area covered by the language is addressed in most detail in Satoshi Nishioka’s chapter on Kunigami, which is arguably the most controversial unit among those identified by UNESCO, in traditional Japanese dialectological accounts of Ryukyuan ethnolects found rarely or not at all.<sup>1</sup>

Part Two, *The Songs and Languages of Ryukyuan Islands* (*Ryūkyū-no shimajima-no uta-to kotoba* 琉球の島々の唄と言葉), contains a multilingual script of *Ryūkyū-no shimajima-no utamono-tachi* 琉球の島々の唄者たち ‘songsters of Ryukyuan islands’, an event which took place in the Okinawa University on February 18, 2012, the video of which has been recorded on a DVD attached to the publication. During the event, folk singers speaking and singing in Okinawan, Miyakoan, Yaeyaman and Yonaguni languages were asked to sing a number of songs in their traditional languages as well as to deliver some lines in those languages. The script includes these lines along with their Japanese translation, and also the lyrics of some of the songs, again translated into Japanese. The script is supplemented with a paper by the chair of the event, Bairon Fija, on a new proposal of a classification of Ryukyuan folk music which, unlike previous classifications, would take account of the language of the songs and thus place greater value on the interplay between traditional music genres and the heritage languages.

Lending most of its title to the book itself, Part Three carries on with the script to *Ryūkyū shogo-no fukkō-o mezashite* 琉球諸語の復興を目指して ‘how to restore Ryukyuan languages?’, a follow-up symposium to the folk music event from Part Two. The script, this time essentially in Japanese with incidental bits in Okinawan, provides the text of presentations on language revitalization conducted by Japanese specialists on Hawaii (Nobuyuki Tsukahara) and Catalan (Kōji Matsubara), as well as Fija’s speech concerning linguistic and extra-linguistic evidence for affirming Ryukyuan as independent languages instead of “dialects” of Japanese. The presentations are followed by a transcript of the panel discussion pertaining to relevant issues of the revitalization of Ryukyuan, such as language awareness and attitudes in the Ryukyus and Japan and the available or conceivable practical solutions to impede the language endangerment.

<sup>1</sup> There is a tendency in Japanese descriptions to match the ethnolect areas with geographical regions, so the traditional division of Ryukyuan accords with the archipelago’s island groups: Amami, Okinawa, Miyako, Yaeyama and Yonaguni. In contrast, the concept of “Kunigami language” embraces a number of islands of the Amami and Okinawa island groups as well as the northern part of Okinawa main island.

The greatest merit of this publication could probably be attributed to the concise descriptions of every language under consideration, which provide a relevant overview of Ryukyuan regardless if the reader is a newcomer or a specialist in the area. Equal value is placed on all six local languages identified by UNESCO, which allows for an even description of varied language characteristics as found throughout the islands. This has not always been the case in the existing publications, in which a noticeable bias favoring the description of the historically privileged Okinawan language to the exclusion of the remaining distinct Ryukyuan regiolects can often be observed. Another remarkable asset of the work under consideration is the video record of speakers-singers of four Ryukyuan languages, along with its script inserted into the publication. The video is an unquestionably valuable piece of linguistic documentation; for most of its viewers it will certainly be the first, and, alas, perhaps the only, chance to hear and watch people speak Ryukyuan in an approximately natural setting.

As for the points that could use an improvement, one can point out the heterogeneity of the descriptive chapters in Part One. Chapters do not follow a unified template and therefore they vary greatly in volume, contents and descriptive details. Thus, for instance, several chapters include sociolinguistic information such as the estimated number of speakers and level of endangerment (at least of selected regional varieties, such as Yuwan for Amami), while others do not; chapters on Yaeyaman and Yonaguni present the complete phonemic systems of the respective languages, while others are limited to a mentioning of the most distinct phonemic features, etc. It can be assumed that this edition was being prepared hurriedly and the main concern of the publishers was an early release rather than cohesion of the volume. If that was indeed the case, then the outcome is perfectly understood, and it allows to expect necessary corrections in the future publications of a similar kind.

Another drawback can be witnessed in Part Two. The script in all Ryukyuan languages is provided in one of Japanese syllabic scripts, either *hiragana* (Okinawan) or *katakana* (the remaining three), mixed with the semantic *kanji* characters in the manner of Japanese writing system. Japanese syllabaries are notoriously ill-suited for the notation of Ryukyuan languages with their more complex syllable structure and specific sounds not found in Japanese, and so the accuracy of representation suffering is an obvious result of this notation choice. Nevertheless, such a decision on the editors' part can be explained if one considers the fact that the book was written with general Japanese audiences rather than international linguistic community in mind, and so accessibility was favored over accuracy.

Moreover, the video record of the event lacks subtitles for its Ryukyuan parts; in order to comprehend the onscreen talk, the viewer is forced to simultaneously read the script from the book, causing significant inconvenience in the watching experience.

To sum up, *Ryūkyū shōgo-no fukkō* is a pioneering publication to fill the gap in reference books on the Ryukyuan part of the Japanese/Japonic family. There are more such publications to come, including especially the groundbreaking 2015 *Handbook of Ryukyuan languages* published by Mouton de Gruyter in the Handbooks of Japanese Language and Linguistics series (Heinrich et al. 2015; unfortunately, this author has not yet had the chance to personally verify the content of this publication). The language of *Ryūkyū shōgo-no fukkō* is Japanese, and therefore its accessibility to a worldwide audience may be significantly low. Nevertheless, it is a must-have for specialists in Japanese/Japonic linguistics who wish to

acquire relevant and updated knowledge on the recent achievements in the field. Furthermore, due to the raw Ryukyuan language material available with the book, it would also make a valuable supplement of resources to anyone interested in language documentation and linguistic diversity, including those who are not fluent in Japanese.

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