Patrick Heinrich

Look who’s Talking. Language Choices in the Ryukyu Islands

Universität Duisburg-Essen
Patrick Heinrich
University of Duisburg – Essen (Germany)

Look who’s Talking. Language Choices in the Ryukyu Islands
Look who’s Talking. Language Choices in the Ryukyu Islands

1. Introduction

This paper reports on various language shifts in the Ryukyu Islands: shift from local language to Standard Japanese, shift from Standard Japanese to mixed language varieties and shift from local language to mixed language. These shifts take place at different islands and at different periods of time. Language shift finds expression in language choices. Languages are lost by domains of use in which the language variety in question appears to be appropriate or not appropriate.

Language choices never occur in a social vacuum. Speakers’ choices between the language varieties in different domains are always structured. They are systematically linked to situations and social relationships. Purely referential language does not exist. Rather, language gives its speaker away in that it points at social and regional background, age, gender, among many other things. Moreover, every speaker is constrained by the language choices of other speakers. In order to clarify language shift processes in the Ryukyu Islands, the sociolinguistic variables age, gender and educational standard are taken into consideration in the present paper.

2. Survey on the Linguistic Situation in the Ryukyu Islands

The following analysis is based on survey results on language choices in the Ryukyu Islands. Research was conducted between July 2005 and March 2006 and a total of 2,000 questionnaires were distributed on the islands of Amami, Okinawa, Miyako, Ishigaki and Yonaguni. These islands were chosen because they reflect the major divisions within the Ryukyuan language family (Hokama 1971; Uemura 1997). No specific attempts were made to render the questionnaire survey representative. This would have required at least 1,000 systematically selected informants per island group, an endeavour not feasible within the confines of the present research project.¹ The questionnaires were distributed randomly by the present author, usually in front of town halls. Out of 2,000 questionnaires distributed, 448 were sent back (22%). These constitute the basis for the present analysis. The distribution of questionnaires and informants according to island is as follows: Amami 72

¹ Research was supported by a grant of the Japanese Society for the Promotion of Science which is gratefully acknowledged here. I would furthermore like to thank Shinsho Miyara for hosting the project as well as developing and discussing many of the ideas in the present paper. I would also like to thank Masahide Ishihara and Colin Williams for discussing this project with me and Jun Imai and Peter Backhaus for reading and commenting on earlier drafts of this paper. Finally, I owe debt of gratitude to Florian Axt for processing the data.
The effects of language shift are the subject of research in this paper. Language shift started immediately after the Japanese annexation of the Ryukyu Kingdom in 1872, when Japanese was stipulated to be used in administration and compulsory education. Language shift was further advanced with the establishment of local newspapers. Newspapers were exclusively written in Japanese, and so were novels and most other literary works. Japanese administration, compulsory school education, the establishment of newspapers and the modern novel thus had the effect that Japanese came to be the sole language used for writing and all official functions, while the Ryukyuan local languages became restricted to matters considered less important. As an effect, use of the Ryukyuan languages became predominantly confined to the family and the neighbourhood by the start of the 20th century (Heinrich 2004).

The linguistic situation in the Ryukyu Islands is complex and cannot be summarized, however briefly, within the limited confines of the present paper. In view of the fact that the Ryukyuan languages are often classified as Japanese dialects, a few remarks concerning the distance between the Ryukyuan language family and Japanese, which is the only other genealogically related language, cannot be omitted. Glottochronological research has revealed that the distance between the Ryukyuan and the mainland Japanese varieties is considerable. On the basis of Swadesh’s (1955) elementary word-list, the percentage of shared cognates between the Ryukyuan varieties and the Tokyo variety is as follows (Hattori 1954): Tokyo (100%), Amami (68%), Okinawa (66%), Miyako (59%) and Yaeyama (63%).

In view of the fact that closely related branches of language families such as the Slavic or Romance languages share about 70 to 80 percent of the basic vocabulary and that a percentage of less than 85 is usually seen to constitute enough distance to speak of language in their own rights, the classification of the Ryukyuan varieties as Japanese dialects is not without problems.

The classification of the Ryukyuan varieties as dialects of Japan’s ‘national language’ (kokugo) rests on two principles. To start with, it has its basis in the shared Japanese-

---

2 Three different surveys were conducted in Okinawa. Due to the limitation of space, no differentiation between the three surveys will be made in the present paper. In Yonaguni, which has a population of 1,800 inhabitants only, a large part of the questionnaires had to be inserted into people's letter boxes – therefore the lower reply rate there.


4 Glottochronology is a diachronic variant of lexicostatistics which is used to estimate the period of time when two genealogically related languages split. Based on analogy with C14 dating, glottochronology is based on the assumption that languages loose 19% of their basic vocabulary in 1,000 years. In that way, the percentage of cognates between two languages is used as means to specify the time of language split.
Ryukyuan genealogy and, more crucially, in the fact that the Ryukyuan varieties are the only genealogically related branch of Japanese. The Ryukyuan-Japanese language split is believed to have occurred at some point after the 3rd century BC but no later than the 7th century AD (Uemura 2003). Already many decades ago scholars such as Kinjō (1944) pointed out that genealogy rests on diachronic principles and that, deriving thereof, not all genealogically related language varieties necessarily have to belong to the same language. Furthermore, it was only after the ‘dissolving of the Ryukyu Kingdom’ (Ryūkyū shobun), i.e. the Japanese annexation of the Ryukyu Islands and their subsequent inclusion into the Japanese nation state, that the Ryukyuan varieties came to be designated as ‘greater dialects’ (dai-hōgen) of the modern ideological construct of ‘national language’ (Oguma 1998; Lee 1996). The other greater dialect according to this categorization is Japanese (Tōjō 1927).

In contrast to this view, much contemporary linguistic research (e.g. Chew 1989; Goebel & Fotos 2001; Maher & Yashiro 1995) and archaeological research (e.g. Barnes 1999; Hanihara 1991, 1992; Kidder 1993) stress the fact that Japan is multilingual and, what is more, that it has always been. The present paper subsequently treats the Ryukyuan varieties as languages in their own right (for other classifications of Ryukyuan language varieties as languages see e.g. Grimes 2000; Klose 1987; Ruhlen 1987; Voegelin 1997). Rather than being unified by an ideological concept of kokugo, Japan is perceived to have 11 indigenous languages in the present paper. These are Japanese and Japanese sign language as languages of wider communication and, from north to south, the regional languages Shakalin Ainu, Kurile Ainu, Hokkaido Ainu, Ogasawara Creole English, Amami Ryukyuan, Okinawa Ryukyuan, Miyako Ryukyuan, Yaeyama Ryukyuan and Yonaguni Ryukyuan. Of these languages, only Japanese and Japanese sign language are safe. Shakalin Ainu and Kurile Ainu are extinct and all other local languages of Japan are threatened by extinction. The Ryukyuan languages are seriously endangered in their survival (Heinrich 2004).

Before turning to the results of the present survey, a few words on the nomenclature and definition of languages and language varieties used in the questionnaires are in place. In the survey, a differentiation was made between (1) local Ryukyuan languages (shimakotoba), (2) Standard Japanese (hyōjungo) and (3) mixed or hybrid forms of local language and Standard Japanese (sono kotoba o mazeru). In absence of fixed English designations for the local languages, they are named here after the main islands on which they are spoken, i.e. Amami, Okinawa, Miyako, Yaeyama and Yonaguni. It should furthermore be noted that the classification of language and language varieties in the survey implies a simplification of the linguistic situation since it evokes the idea of one shared language variety in these islands or island groups which is, however, not the case. Terms such as e.g. Amami thus refer to a cluster of unroofed language varieties spoken in the Amami island group. What is termed mixed language here emerged in the Meiji-period
(1868-1912) as an effect of Japanese language spread. Mixed language shows strong variation according to region and age of its speakers (Takaesu 2005).

3. Language Choices in the Ryukyu Islands

Since language shift in the private domain is accompanied by the interruption of natural intergenerational language transmission, the language repertoire of the Ryukyuan population differs. The synchronic variety of Ryukyuan in the local communities has been characterized by a transition of older fluent speakers over middle-aged semi-speakers to young Japanese monolinguals (Matsumori 1995; Nagata 1996). It is important to keep in mind that the following discussions do not depict the percentages of speakers of Standard Japanese, mixed language or local language in the Ryukyu Archipelago but the frequencies with which these languages varieties are used. This is an important distinction because matters related to language choice have, in first place, to do with the appropriateness of language varieties in specific domains.

In differentiating between the three language varieties identified above, the overall language choices when addressing (1) spouse, (2) children, (3) parents, (4) grandparents, (5) neighbours and (6) colleagues are depicted in table 1. The sum total for the figures for local language, Standard Japanese and mixed language is always 100% as the table represents all language choices in the Ryukyu Islands with regard to these three language varieties.

Table 1: ‘How do you address whom’ (N = 448 x 6 domains)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Amami</th>
<th>Okinawa</th>
<th>Miyako</th>
<th>Yaeyama</th>
<th>Yonaguni</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local language</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard Japanese</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed language</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table reveals marked differences between the five Ryukyuan languages, confirming the view that no two language shift situations are alike (Brenzinger 1997). It shows that Japanese today is by far the most frequently used language in the Ryukyu Islands, followed by mixed language and then by the respective local language. With regard to the use of
Standard Japanese, the following ranking can be made: Yaeyama (64%), Okinawa (55%), Miyako (52%), Yonaguni (45%) and Amami (43%). Local language use stands highest in Yonaguni (24%), followed by Miyako (21%), Amami (13%), Okinawa (10%) and finally Yaeyama (7%). Due to the fact that Ryukyuans choose between three language varieties, the choice of the local language cannot be complementary to the choice of Standard Japanese. It is not possible to formulate general rules concerning language choices which are valid for all five islands. This is crucial. Language choices reflect language attitudes and, hence, the differing language choices we encounter across the Ryukyu Islands reveal differing language attitudes. These language attitudes will be explored in more detail by considering age as a sociolinguistic variable.

3.1. Language Choice and Age

Due to language shift away from local languages, age is today the most important variable determining language choice in the Ryukyu Islands (Matsumori 1995). It is important to bear in mind that, in contrast to the first half of the 20th century, mixed language can no longer be attributed to linguistic imperfection on behalf of the Ryukyuans but, in view of high proficiency in Standard Japanese, as a purposeful, and thus meaningful, linguistic choice.

In order to attain a better understanding when language shift occurred and how thoroughgoing it was, the population is divided into small subgroups based on the decade of their birth year in the next table. Cases where less than five informants are available have been omitted. Since the default language choice in the public domain has been Standard Japanese since the early 20th century, only language choices when addressing one's spouse, children, parents, grandparents and neighbours are considered.

Table 2: Local language use in the private domain and birth year (N = 448 x 5 domains)
These figures allow us to specify the time of language shift and its extent in the Ryukyu Archipelago more precisely. As can be seen, the three islands of Okinawa, Yaeyama and Yonaguni cluster in that a thorough language shift can be recognized there between the 1940s and the 1950s. Informants born from the 1960s onwards usually do not use the language any longer. We can generalize that people from Okinawa, Yaeyama and Yonaguni born after the 1950s can usually not use the local language actively. The case is different for Amami and Miyako. We find no traces of language shift in Amami in the 1940s, due to the fact that Amami as part of Kagoshima prefecture did not experience similarly severe suppression of the local languages as the other islands did. Pivotal in the oppression of the language at the time was the ‘Movement for Enforcement of Standard Japanese’ (hyōjungo reikō undo) which was established in 1931 in Okinawa Prefecture. The movement subsequently developed schemes for spreading Japanese more thoroughly throughout Okinawa Prefecture (Hokama 1971: 84-89). Japanese language spread efforts went hand in hand with a stigmatization of the local languages. A particularly notorious form of penalizations was thereby the use of the ‘dialect-tag’ (hōgen fuda), to be worn around the neck by pupils using local language (Itani 2006; Kondō 2006).

In Amami, a drastic drop of local language use among those born in the 1960s can be observed. This language shift thus differs from all other locations in that it was (1) later and (2) not the direct effect of language suppression during the general mobilisation campaign and (3) not affected by a Ryukyuan desire of reunification with (mainland) Japan. Amami was reunified with Japan already in 1953 while Okinawa Prefecture was only reunified in 1972.

Miyako is characterized by a steady decline in the use of local language among informants born until the 1950s and then, surprisingly, sees a reversal of this trend. We must, however, be careful to not interpret these figures as a sign of reversing language shift too quickly. Suffice it to say that frequent use of local language in Miyako notwithstanding, only five informants (6%) reported to use the language when addressing their children. Two of them were born in 1926, and one in 1928, the remaining two in 1970 and 1980. A reversal of language shift, presupposes repairing natural intergenerational language transmission which is, however, not in sight in Miyako. Nonetheless, we can safely conclude that language shift in Miyako was not as pronounced as in the other locations and, more importantly, that those born after 1960 and proficient in the local language use it more frequently than older speakers.

In order to attain a better understanding how age correlates with language choices, the choice patterns across generations will be examined next. A differentiation will be made between the ‘young generation’ (0-30), the ‘middle generation’ (30-60) and the ‘older generation’ (older than 60). Table 3 summarizes the older generation's language choice when addressing spouse, children, parents, grandparents, neighbours and colleagues.
More often than not, the older generation is the only generation to have three language varieties to choose from their linguistic repertoire. Nonetheless, we can recognize that the local language is the language used least often by the older generation in Amamai, Okinawa, Miyako and Yaeyama. A notable exception is Yonaguni, where the local language is the most frequently used language variety. High frequency of local language use is contrasted by little use of Standard Japanese in Yonaguni. Figures for Standard Japanese are also low in Amami and Yaeyama. In these two islands, less use of Standard Japanese is counterbalanced by a high frequency of mixed language. Mixed language is a category which is not well defined (see above) and we must be aware that informants must have different views on what mixed language is. This is crucial in particular with regard to the boundaries to Standard Japanese and the local languages. In Yaeyama, where Standard Japanese is spoken most frequently, the older generation could be tempted to perceive their use of (Standard) Japanese as deviant, while in Amami, where we find much use of mixed language (see table 1), many informants of the older generation might often prefer the mixed variety over Standard Japanese purposefully. We will return to this issue further below.

Let us proceed to an analysis of the middle generation next. Bear in mind here, that, with the exception of Miyako, most informants have little or only passive knowledge of the local languages and that this affects their language choice patterns (see table 2).
That local language use in Amami and Miyako is comparatively high suggests that language shift was less radical here. Nonetheless, across all islands the middle generation never uses local language more frequently than average. The average frequency of local language among all 448 informants stands at 13% in Amami, 10% in Okinawa, 21% in Miyako, 7% in Yaeyama and 24% in Yonaguni. Apart from Amami less than average is used. This serves as a reminder that the middle generation, with exception of Miyako, is the generation which shifted away from the local languages and that Amami did not experience such severe suppression of its local language as the other islands did.

In comparison to the older generation, we thus recognize a shift from local language to Standard Japanese. This is most clearly observable in Yaeyama and Yonaguni. In Yonaguni, the decline of local language use between the old and the middle generation is most pronounced. The frequency of mixed language across the five islands is relatively stable except for Yaeyama. Speakers in Yaeyama, as the place where most Standard Japanese is spoken, appear to adhere more strongly to the norms of Standard Japanese and, as an effect thereof, use mixed forms of language is constrained more strongly. In Amami, by contrast, mixed language seems to be less restricted, which is probably another effect of less vigorous efforts to spread Standard Japanese here. Hence, the high amount of mixed language use by the middle and the older generation.

Consider the language choice patterns of the young generation next. As can be expected from the fact that few members of the young generation speak the local language, we arrive here at a markedly different pattern.
Table 5: Languages choices of the young generation (N = 87 x 6 domains)

Table 5 shows that the local language is no longer used among the young generation in Yaeyama and Yonaguni. Due to the low frequency of usage among the middle generation, we can conclude that local language is first and foremost associated with the older generation there. In Yaeyama, with its general pattern of low local language use, the absence of local language among the young generation is of little surprise. The absence of local language among the young generation in Yonaguni, however, reveals that language shift has been very drastic between the middle and the young generation. The loss of local language as a language of choice in Yonaguni results in an extremely high percentage of Standard Japanese language use by the young generation. This development is unparalleled in all other islands. Only in Yonaguni are we witnessing a shift from local and mixed language to Standard Japanese between the middle to the young generation.

Use of local language is also low among the young generation in Amami and Okinawa. Due to the fact that many Ryukyuans today live in two-generation households and because many of the middle generation do not have local language proficiency themselves, many of the young generation are not exposed to local language any longer. This is markedly different, however, in the case of Miyako. No other generation uses as much local language as the young generation there. Overall, the high percentage of mixed language in Amami, Okinawa and Yaeyama is striking.

To summarize, five basic points emerge form the analysis of language choices in relation to age.

(1) Language proficiency is dropping from the old over the middle to the young generation.
(2) There is a shift away from local language varieties from the old to the young generation.
(3) There is a shift away from Standard Japanese to mixed language, in the case of Miyako to local language, between the middle and the young generation. Yonaguni is an exception.

(4) In Yonaguni, no shift from Standard Japanese to mixed language can be attested. Rather, there is a shift from local language and mixed language towards Standard Japanese.

(5) In Miyako the young generation chooses to use the local language very frequently.

It has by now become evident that not everyone proficient in the local languages uses them at all occasions. Furthermore, we find different language choice patterns for each generation. In order to advance our understanding of how these patterns come about, the study of other variables is necessary.

3.2. Language Use and Educational Background

Educational background is influential in determining language choices. A distinction is made here between informants with primary education (elementary school and middle school), secondary education (high school) and higher education (universities, colleges and profession schools). In so doing, we arrive at the following general pattern of local language use across the Ryukyu Archipelago. The charts in section 3.2 differ from those in the preceding subchapter in that the sum total for each island is not 100% because they depict only one choice of one of three language varieties. In other words, the figures for e.g. local language represent not only who uses local language but also to what extent is it used in which island.

Table 6: Local language use and educational background (N = 139 x 6 domains)
Table 6 demonstrates that a predominant part of the local language users have a primary educational background. Since the prevalent number of pupils in Japan, ever since the educational reforms in the occupation period (1945-1952), graduate after high school, more than half of those with primary education (53%) belong to the older generation. Yaeyama, however, represents a remarkable exception to the overall pattern in this table. Despite the fact that there are only three informants (born 1929, 1934 and 1980) with a primary education background in the Yaeyama data sample, the complete absence of local language use in the six domains surveyed is unexpected. It appears that the inhabitants of Yaeyama subscribe most strongly to *kokugo* language ideology according to which all Japanese are united by a ‘national language’ which is represented by its standard variety (*hyōjungo*) and which treats, in extension, any deviations from it as ‘incorrect’ language use (Mashiko 1997). This attitude makes itself felt in particular to all those part of the linguistic margin (Inoue 1996), in the case of Yaeyama, speakers with primary educational background.

The situation in Amami contrasts strongly with that in Yaeyama. In Amami, local language is used more or less to the same extent by informants with primary, secondary or higher education. In other words, no direct correlation between local language and basic educational standards can be observed. In Okinawa and Miyako, on the other hand, the percentage of speakers using local language corresponds to the sum total of informants with secondary and higher education. In Yonaguni finally, there is an almost complete absence of local language users having a higher educational background. It is thus important to note that a similar disposition towards local language varieties leads to different patterns of language choices. In Yonaguni, the local language is avoided by speakers having completed higher education while speakers with primary education in Yaeyama tend towards hypercorrection and never use the local language. These are two sides of the same coin. In Yaeyama and Yonaguni, a social stigma remains attached to the local languages.

Let us proceed further by examining the frequency of Standard Japanese language use in its correlation with educational background.
With the exception of Amami and Yaeyama, the use of Standard Japanese in correlation with educational background is consistent. We arrive at relatively similar patterns in Okinawa, Miyako and Yonaguni in that Standard Japanese is used most often by speakers with higher education. In other words, frequent use of Standard Japanese serves as an indicator of high educational standards. This is not the case in Amami where informants with secondary educational standard use Standard Japanese most often. In Yaeyama, we find a comparatively high rate of Standard Japanese language use among informants with primary education which is due to the scarcity of local language use (see table 6). In Yonaguni, finally, Standard Japanese more clearly than in any other island is a marker of speakers having completed higher education.

With regard to the correlation between educational background and use of mixed language we arrive at the following results.
The choice pattern for mixed language is most diverse and it is not possible to cluster islands on the basis of this table. Most surprising is the high percentage of mixed language use by speakers with higher education. Okinawa aside, no other group employs as much mixed language. This is meaningful in two ways. It points out that (1) mixed language, once perceived as ‘Japanese corrupted by Ryukyuan influences’ (see Kuwae 1954[1930]) has been re-evaluated, and (2) that this re-evaluation is led by those with higher educational backgrounds. They, in particular, choose to use mixed language frequently and it is their usage which reduces the stigma.

In Amami, mixed language is often chosen by speakers with primary and higher education and it is in particular the latter which deserve attention. The high frequencies of mixed language use in Amami substantiates the finding that mixed language is least stigmatized there. In other words, norms of correctness are less strict in Amami than in other islands. Yaeyama is at the opposite end of this spectrum. In Okinawa, on the other hand, those with secondary education use mixed language particularly frequently, whereas those of higher educational background use it least. Use or avoidance of mixed language in Okinawa thus differentiates more strongly than anywhere else between those with secondary and higher education. In other words, highlighting this difference is seen to be important in Okinawa and the amount of mixed language use is an indicator thereof. In Miyako, the use of mixed language is balanced between those with secondary and higher education, but informants with primary education who use mixed language are all but absent. The absence of mixed language contrasts thus with the high figures for local language use among informants with primary education (table 6). This is a meaningful result. It points as it does to the fact that local language and mixed language serve similar functions. This can also be recognized, partly, in Yonaguni, where local language is used to a considerable degree among informants with primary education who, in turn, employ mixed language.
comparatively seldom. Also recall in this context that in Yaeyama the low figures for local language among those with primary education are compensated by a high proportion of mixed language (table 6 and 8).

On account of these results, we arrive at three conclusions.

1. Okinawa aside, speakers with higher education use mixed language most frequently. This reveals a re-evaluation of mixed language.
2. In Amami, the local language appears not to be marked with lower educational standards nor does mixed language appear to be stigmatizing.
3. In cases that the local or mixed language is not stigmatized, mixed language assumes functions of the local language among those not proficient in local languages. This is most clearly observable in Amami and Miyako.

Let us proceed further in our analysis of language choices by taking gender into account.

3.3. Language Choice and Gender

Language is known to be a key component in the social construction of gender. Some of the differences in gendered speech such as women using less often non-standard forms or being more cooperative in communication are believed to reflect women’s position in society (Coulmas 2005: 38), i.e. gendered power inequality and women being the main caregivers to children (Cameron 1992). It has furthermore been argued that women and men are members of different subgroups, because a large part of their socialisation takes place in single-sex peer groups (Holmes & Stubbe 1997; Tannen 1994). While, depending on the object of research, men and women do not necessarily display linguistic differences (see e.g. Hibiya 1988) and while the idea of an existence of a monolithic women’s language in Japan has convincingly been refuted as a modern language ideological construct (Inoue 2006), we might nonetheless expect different patterns between men and women when it comes to something as fundamental as language choice in multilingual settings.

Gender differences with regard to language choices in the present survey are summarized in table 9. It reveals that women across all islands speak less frequently local language. In addition, the more often local language is used (Miyako and Yonaguni), the more pronounced are the gender differences. This is important because it indicates that women shift faster than men, or, seen the other way round, men are more prone to resist language shift. With this in mind, let us proceed to an analysis of the gendered language choices for the other language varieties.
With regard to Standard Japanese, the picture is more diverse. There is no gender difference with regard to the choice of Standard Japanese in Amami, Okinawa, Miyako and Yaeyama, but women use markedly more Standard Japanese than men in Yonaguni. The situation of women using more standard forms than men is, more often than not, the regular sociolinguistic pattern (see above). In addition, women tend to shift faster than men in reaction to ongoing social changes. The figures for Yonaguni can thus be seen as an ongoing shift away from local language to Standard Japanese. This reading is supported by figures of local and Standard Japanese language use between the old and the young generations in Yonaguni (see table 3 and 5), which is characterized by the biggest inter-generational disparities we find across the Ryukyu Archipelago.

Miyako constitutes an extremely interesting case, because the analysis of gender allows, finally, for a more detailed account on language shifts in Miyako. Recall that we could neither establish a clear period of time when language shift from local language to Standard Japanese (table 2) or from Standard Japanese to mixed language (table 5) took place. With regard to gendered language choices we recognize, however, noticeable differences with regard to local and mixed language use in Miyako. This pattern reveals a slow shift away from local language towards mixed language. In other words, what took two shifts in Amami, Okinawa and Yaeyama, is achieved in Miyako in one slow and gradual process. This is to be accounted for by the late period of time of language shift, i.e. shift is occurring in a complete different situation than it did in the 1940s and 1950s. The case of Miyako also exemplifies that, except for Yonaguni, Standard Japanese is today no longer a language variety to shift to.

What deserves further attention is the case of Okinawa and Yaeyama. Since these are the two islands where Standard Japanese is used most frequently, we cannot interpret the gendered differences here as a shift from local or mixed language to Standard Japanese. This shift has already been completed. This leaves us with the second shift we can observe.
across the three generations, namely shift from Standard Japanese to mixed language. In other words, we must interpret these figures of men retaining high frequencies of Standard Japanese language in Okinawa and Yaeyama as of lagging behind language shift to mixed language. Women, on the other hand, have already started shifting from Standard Japanese to mixed language.

The situation with mixed language, finally, is more clear-cut across the archipelago, with women using more mixed language in Amami, Okinawa, Miyako and Yaeyama but less in Yonaguni. These figures render further credibility to the observation that the first four islands are experiencing a shift from Standard Japanese to mixed language, whereas Yonaguni is in the process of shifting from local language to Standard Japanese. As an effect of shifting away from local language, mixed language is perceived to be stigmatized quite strongly in Yonaguni and, consequently, mixed language is avoided by female informants. Note in this context the overall low figures for mixed language in Yonaguni (shift to Standard Japanese), which contrast with the high figures for Amami, where shift away from Standard Japanese to mixed language has developed furthest.

To summarize, we attain the following results with regard to the correlations between language choices and gender.

(1) Men use more local language and more Standard Japanese while women use more mixed language than men. Yonaguni is an exception.

(2) In Yonaguni, women use more Standard Japanese but less local and mixed language than men. This supports the interpretation of language shift from local and mixed language to Standard Japanese and the huge gender differences point out that shift is radical.

(3) In Amami, Okinawa, and Yaeyama, we witness a shift in progress from Standard Japanese to mixed language. Women are leading this shift.

(4) In Miyako, language shift cannot be recognized as easily as in the other islands. The higher frequencies of men using local language in combination with their lower frequencies of mixed language indicate a shift from local language to mixed language.

(5) Gender differences are least pronounced in Amami, which can be attributed to the fact that language shift processes are least pronounced here. This contrasts noticeably with Yonaguni.
4. Conclusions

To start with, the language shifts occurring in the Ryukyu Islands are summarized.

(1) Historical language shifts

Language shift in the public domain started in the 1880s. Language shift in the private domain, which resulted in the interruption of natural language transmittance of the local Ryukyuan languages, can be observed in the 1940s and 1950s for Okinawa, Yaeyama and Yonaguni. This shift started only in the 1950s in Amami. Miyako did not experience such radical language shift in the private domain. Rather, language shift away from the local language is more gradual there.

In addition, three more language shifts are currently taking place in the Ryukyu Islands.

(2) Language shifts in progress I

Amami, Okinawa and Yaeyama are shifting from Standard Japanese to mixed language. In Amami this shift has been almost completed, whereas it is being on the way in Yaeyama. Okinawa is between these two extremes. Women (table 9), and less so speakers with higher education (table 8) are leading this process. Mixed language is thereby replacing the local language. The dynamism of this shift is influenced by the language ideological assessment of the local language. Where the local language is strongly stigmatized (Yaeyama) such shift is less thorough than in places where the local language is less stigmatized (Amami).

(3) Language shifts in progress II

In Miyako, we witness a shift from local language and Standard Japanese to mixed language. In other words, the intermediate stage of shift from local language to Standard Japanese is less pronounced. Shift is initiated by women and speakers with higher education. It appears that this shift is relatively new and not yet well developed.

(4) Language shift in progress III

In Yonaguni, a shift away from local language to Standard Japanese can be ascertained. More radically than in any other island, Yonaguni is in an unabated process of shifting away from the local language. There are no clear signs of a re-evaluation of either the local language variety or of mixed language.

Shift away from Standard Japanese to hybrid language varieties have been witnessed and described all across Japan (see e.g. Inoue 1986; Sanada 2000). The shifts in Amami, Okinawa, Miyako and Yaeyama thus reflect a general trend. The same holds true for the decline in local languages. Japan’s other surviving local languages, Hokkaido Ainu and Ogasawara Creole English are also in decline.
For the time being, we should expect to see the local languages and Standard Japanese to be in decline across the Ryukyu Islands. Yonaguni is an exception since only the local language is in decline there. With the older generation being the main users of local language, except for Miyako, usage of local language is also bound to further decrease. As it stands, local languages loose speakers day by day and this will ultimately also affect the usage of local languages. Their prestige will be raising and, in so doing, affect also the language attitudes towards Standard Japanese and mixed languages. We can thus expect that the prestige of Standard Japanese will continue to be in decline and that this will be reflected in language choices. Mixed language on the other hand, will probably be positively affected by the raise of prestige of the local languages. Whether the mixed language varieties in the Ryukyu Islands will take over the functions of the local languages is a crucial question with regard to the survival of the local languages. In that case, the local languages would, after all, be left without a social function and thus become redundant. The shift towards mixed language we are witnessing might, however, reveal a yearning for local language by people no longer proficient in it. In that case, a future shift from mixed language to local language should not be ruled out. Such shift would, however, require concentrated and purposeful measures for language revitalization. The scenario for language revitalization is thereby most favourable in Okinawa due to its human resources and educational institutions. In outlying islands such as Amami and Miyako, this deficit can, to a certain extent, be compensated by language attitudes and language choice patterns more favourable to local language revitalization. In Yaeyama and Yonaguni the situation looks least promising.

It has become evident that the language shifts in progress are more complex and less uniform than those we witnessed with the introduction of Standard Japanese in the 1880s affecting the public domain and the shifts in the private domain in the 1940s and 1950s. The diverging patterns we find in the present-day Ryukyu Islands reveal that the process of linguistic modernization, i.e. standardization of language use within the Japanese nation state, has come to an end. In particular, speakers of the young generation increasingly often prefer other varieties in specific situations. This differs to the ‘classical’ or ‘modern’ shift in which shift patterns were always in favour of the dominant language of wider communication. The shifts we are witnessing in Amami, Okinawa, Miyako and Yaeyama can thus be said to be post-modern in nature. How drastic these shift will be and whether they will eventually involve the local languages as well, can not yet be foreseen. It is however clear, that these shifts must be understood in the light of broader contexts of cultural resistance and local mobilization. Since we do not know yet, how successful cultural resistance and local mobilization will be in Japan and whether it will encompass the local languages, the future of the Ryukyuan languages remains uncertain. The field of study depicted in the present paper will therefore continue to deserve our attention.
References


