

WHAT LEAVES A MARK SHOULD NO LONGER STAIN

Progressive erasure and reversing language shift activities in the Ryukyu Islands

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1. Introduction

Language as a resource is always quick at hand for the formation of national identities. Japan is a case in point (Lee, 1996; Oguma, 1998; Osa, 1998; Tanaka et al., 1997; Yasuda, 2000). However, unlike Anderson's (1991) view that language lay ready as a resource to establish nations as imagined communities, national languages do not come into existence by themselves. Japanese as a national language (*kokugo*) was not 'out there', waiting to be used for the definition of the Japanese nation. National languages are in the same way as the nation ideological constructs. The relationship between the two is dialectic. In creating a national language, language modernisers have to respond to various requirements modernisation processes bring along. Language ideology plays a pivotal role thereby. Drawing on the work of Bourdieu (1991), Eagleton (1991) and Thompson (1984; 1990) the study of language ideology is conceived here as an investigation into origin and effect of beliefs about language structure and use as well as the way in which these beliefs are promoted and spread beyond the social groups whose interests they serve. Since language is a commodity shared among all members of a speech community, it becomes the prime medium of ideological conflict and province of power struggles. The study of language ideology has therefore to account for (1) the processes in which ideology is created from dominant groups and (2) for the effects it takes on those whose interests are not recognised in these processes. This paper discusses aspects of the latter point, ie effects of Japanese language modernisation on the linguistic situation in the Ryukyu Islands.

The Ryukyu Islands are located between Japan's most southern main island Kyushu to the north and Taiwan to the south. Based on the criteria of mutual intelligibility, five language varieties can be ascertained, from north to south: Amami Oshima, Okinawa, Miyako, Yaeyama and Yonaguni. Ryukyuan and Japanese originate from the same parent language but split at some point between the 3rd and the 7th century (Hattori, 1954). The common genealogy led Japanese scholars of national linguistics (*kokugogaku*) to claim that Ryukyuan was a greater dialect (*dai-hogen*) of the national language (*kokugo*), the other greater dialect being Japanese (Tojo, 1927; 1938). Classification of Ryukyuan as a

greater dialect reflects attempts to provide Japan with one unifying language in order to define the nation via language (Koyama, 2003). This serves as a reminder that 'dialect' is an emic category. It relies on various criteria such as ethnicity, language genealogy, language typology, unshared linguistic innovations, orthography and mutual intelligibility. The gap between Ryukyuan and Japanese is considerable. None of the varieties of Ryukyuan allows for mutual intelligibility with any variety of Japanese. Therefore the present paper follows the convention set forth in indexes of world languages (e.g. Grimes, 2000; Herbermann, 1997; Klose, 1987; Ruhlen, 1987; Voegelin, 1997) where Ryukyuan is treated as a group of languages rather than a greater dialect. A unitary language such as the term Ryukyuan might suggest does not exist since we are dealing with unroofed vernacular languages. The term 'Ryukyuan' is merely used for the sake of brevity here.

The Ryukyu Islands formed a unified kingdom from the 15th century onwards until they were forcibly assimilated into the Japanese nation state in the aftermath of the 1868 Meiji Restoration. Between 1872 and 1879, various measures referred to as the Ryukyu dispensation (*Ryukyu shobun*) were taken by the Japanese central government in order to enforce assimilation to the Japanese mainland (*hondo*). The opinion of Ryukyuan leadership was never consulted in this process. Before the Ryukyu dispensation, Ryukyuan had not developed a consciousness of being Japanese. This was due to cultural and linguistic differences, the formal existence of an independent kingdom, the vast Chinese influences on various fields and the fact that the islands had been exploited in a colony-like way by the Japanese Satsuma Domain (today Kagoshima Prefecture) from the early 17th century onwards (Kerr, 1958). With the inclusion of the Ryukyu Islands into the Japanese nation state, culturally and linguistically different people were incorporated into the Japanese nation.

The Japanese assimilation policy which was launched from the 1880s onwards changed the linguistic situation on the islands. It led to a decline of the local languages. As an effect, their future is endangered today (Grimes, 2000) and active attempts to reverse language shift are necessary to secure their survival. The present paper discusses language shift and attempts of reversing language shift. It is argued that a full understanding of language shift is necessary for the development of successful measures to reverse language shift.

2. Progressive erasure

Tsitsipis (1998; 2003) has proposed an approach for treating language shift which places emphasis on the fact that the consequences of ideologically driven language change are permanently reinterpreted as evidence of the ideology's validity. His approach of progressive erasure is helpful in demonstrating how declining languages are exposed to an ever increasing extent to pressures from the dominating language, in our case Standard Japanese. The progressive erasure of a language involves four stages: fragmentation, marginalisation, sublimation and subordination.

(1) Fragmentation processes are characterised by a narrowing of a language or language variety to restricted functions. In the course of a language's fragmentation, cultural and linguistic coherence is swept away, or in the words of Tsitsipis (2003:550): "The indexical totality [...] between linguistic and extralinguistic order is fragmented."

(2) Marginalisation refers to processes in which the subordinate status brought about as a result of fragmentation is reproduced. Tsitsipis (2003:552) analyses the switch from Arvanitika^[1] to Greek in Arvanitika-Greek contact situations as an instance of Arvanitika marginalisation. It is naturally assumed that Arvanitika speakers have to provide for language accommodation of Greek monolinguals. As we will see below, marginalisation processes are not restricted to matters of language choices in contact situations alone but can be observed on all levels of linguistic description.

(3) Sublimation refers to phenomena in which a language or language variety is decontextualised from its unmarked functions. As an effect, specific language behaviour ceases to be regarded as normal and inevitably foregrounds specific connotations. In short, the language becomes marked. The concept of markedness is here understood in its most general sense. That is to say, language structure and use which regarded as neutral and is therefore expected is unmarked while everything which deviates from such expectations is marked.

(4) Subordination is the final phase in the progressive erasure process. It refers to the stage at which dominated communities find themselves in a position where they can no longer question the hegemonic imposition of the dominating culture. Subordination is the point of no return.

To summarise, the approach of progressive erasure emphasises two points: (1) erasure processes must be assessed as multilayered and reciprocal, and (2) the ideological views accompanying the erasure processes are validated by the effects of progressive erasure. In other words, ideology turns into reality which confirms, to come back full circle, ideology.

2.1. Evidences of fragmentation

Fragmentation in Ryukyuan was caused by three developments closely linked to modernisation: administrative reforms, the emergence of news reporting and modern literature, and the start of compulsory school education. After the Ryukyu dispensation, Japanese became the sole and undisputed language of administration in the Ryukyu Islands. 1879 saw a complete reorganisation of administration, education and executive organisations. In none of these institutions was the use of Ryukyuan ever considered. As an effect, Japanese came to serve as the acknowledged resource for written language, starting from official publications, stretching over to newspapers, books, periodicals and public signs (Matsumori, 1995:40). What is more, Japanese came to be used for modern functions while Ryukyuan was restricted to matters considered less important, if not irrelevant.

The establishment of local newspapers such as the *Ryukyu Shinpu* in 1893, the *Okinawa Shinbun* 1905 and the *Okinawa Mainichi Shinbun* in 1908 further advanced the schism in the functional allocation of Ryukyuan and Japanese. Local newspapers in the Ryukyu archipelago were exclusively written in Japanese. Through their publication, Japanese became the language of news coverage, and, by extension, the language of political and economical debate. Fragmentation was furthermore caused by the emergence of modern Ryukyuan literature. Okinawa literature before 1945 was predominantly devoted to the subject of depicting Ryukyuan life and identity. Local newspapers printed these novels as sequels, as it was commonly done at the time throughout Japan. One of the first Ryukyuan works which reached a broader readership was Kushi Fusako's 1932 novella *Horobiyuku Ryukyu onna no shuki* ('Memoirs of a Declining Ryukyuan Woman'). While 'Memoirs' depicted genuine Ryukyuan perspectives and experiences, it could only reach a broader readership because it was written in Japanese. To write on modern issues was to write in Japanese.

By far the most influential factor contributing to the fragmentation of Ryukyuan was the establishment of compulsory school education in 1880. Since the gap between Ryukyuan and Japanese did not allow for the use of monolingual teaching materials, the bilingual textbook *Okinawa taiwa* ('Okinawa Conversation') was compiled. The practice of using bilingual textbooks only ended in 1905 (Motonaga, 1994:131-132). Choice of Japanese in school education impacted on Ryukyuan to a considerable extent since the language was detached from fields of learning. To talk about learned things, not to mention writing about them, was to use Japanese.

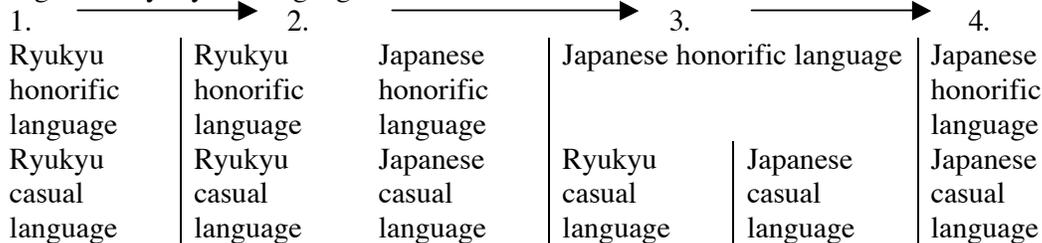
While Ryukyuan continued to be used in the private domain for many decades to come, the fragmentation process was to affect language structure and language use of Ryukyuan enduringly. Fragmentation led to processes of marginalisation.

2.2. Evidences of marginalisation

Marginalisation impacts all levels of linguistic description. Only some of them can be briefly discussed here in order to exemplify the range and the effects of marginalisation. Marginalisation is most evident on the lexical level. Partly as an effect of fragmentation, the Ryukyuan lexicon is smaller than that of Japanese. A process of constant borrowing from Japanese is the effect (Hokama, 2001:97; Matsumori, 1995:35; Nagata, (2001[1983]:450). Marginalisation can also be observed on the level of phonology. A study conducted by Nagata (2001[1983]) on Yonaguni Island reveals a penetration of Standard Japanese phonology into the Yonaguni variety. The result is a new Yonaguni phonemic system which consists of a Yonaguni substratum and a Standard Japanese superstratum. In addition to morphology and syntax (Nagata, 2000[1983]), marginalisation manifests in language attitudes.^[2] After the implementation of an assimilationist policy in the Ryukyu Islands, a view emerged which perceived Ryukyuan proficiency as a burden rather than an asset (see Kurai, 1987; Kuwae, 1954; Nakamoto, 1886; Narita, 2001a[1960] for instances of such views). The principle rationale for this

unbecoming view of Ryukyuan is that proficiency in Ryukyuan causes interferences with Standard Japanese. Marginalisation also affects the use of Ryukyuan to a great extent. Nagata (1996) reports about language shift in contexts where honorific style (*keitai*) is required, and points out that Standard Japanese has come to be exclusively used in formal situations where honorific style is obligatory (e.g. wedding receptions). Nagata's study (1996:157) reveals that language shift in casual speech is preceded by the loss of the Ryukyuan honorific language.

Figure 1: Ryukyuan language shift



According to Nagata, the step from stage one to stage two has been completed. Stage three currently applies to elderly and some middle aged speakers. Younger speakers, however, have moved on to stage four. Language shift in formal contexts is an instance of Ryukyuan marginalisation, and, at the same time, yet another instance of Ryukyuan fragmentation.

No citizen of a modern nation state can solely rely on a fragmented and marginalised language. Accordingly, there is no monolingual speaker of Ryukyuan alive anymore. Ryukyuan speakers are either Ryukyuan-Japanese bilinguals or Japanese monolinguals.

Fragmentation and marginalisation lead to a loss of Ryukyuan proficiency. This is crucial as Ryukyuan increasingly often ceases to be used as a neutral or normal medium of communication. In other words, it is exposed to sublimation processes.

2.3. Evidences of sublimation

Loss of proficiency among speakers born after 1950, the time when natural language transmission was interrupted, led to processes of sublimation. Several field studies based on questionnaires reveal the decontextualisation of Ryukyuan from unmarked functions (e.g. Narita, 2001b[1964]; Teruya, 2001[1976]; Motonaga, 1994). Such studies demonstrate that Ryukyuan serves primarily as a resource of emphasising emotion and familiarity. Motonaga (1994:256), for instance, investigated the contexts in which Ryukyuan is used among school students. His results document Ryukyuan sublimation.

Figure 2: When do you use Ryukyuan?

When telling jokes	47.7%
When talking casually to good friends	36.9%
When speaking ill of someone/something	30.4%

When having an argument	26.8%
When being physically hurt	25.6%
When making fun of a person	23.7%
When being surprised	19.2%
When expressing joy	9.3%
When discussing important matters in class	2.4%
On other occasions	1.7%

As we can recognise from these figures, Ryukyuan does not serve as a medium to discuss important matters, but jokes are apparently best when told in Ryukyuan. Sublimated as it is, Ryukyuan can be used in unmarked function only in the most casual of situations among speakers born before 1950. As a result of sublimation, Ryukyuan merely serves as a commodity of a restricted nature. Using Ryukyuan departs from the neutral. Although Ryukyuan language and customs have recently become incorporated in school education in Okinawa Prefecture, it is important to recognise that the Ryukyuan language which now returns to school education after more than 100 years absence is fragmented, marginalised and sublimated. It returns in the form of songs, poetry and tales and not as a language of instruction.

2.4. Subordination

Speakers of Ryukyuan still find themselves in a position where they can successfully question the hegemonic imposition of Japanese language and culture. At present, there are no evidences of Ryukyuan subordination. Whether this remains so is less sure. Therefore, a few remarks about the lingering dangers of Ryukyuan subordination are in place. The danger of Ryukyuan language loss poses a threat to claims of Ryukyuan culture and identity. Ryukyu identity with or without Ryukyuan is not the same thing. What is more, language loss would constrain the possibilities of developing discourses of resistance against Ryukyuan subordination. Once language proficiency has dropped to an extent as it has done among Ryukyuan born after 1950, it becomes difficult to reverse language shift. Since the child bearing generation does not speak Ryukyuan anymore, they cannot pass it on to their children. It is therefore not unlikely that once those born before 1950 will be gone, Ryukyuan will go with them. Through the loss of Ryukyuan, however, a symbolic link to ancestors, history and culture would be lost. In such a case Ryukyuan would be subordinated. Hence, conscious efforts of reversing language shift are necessary to avoid language loss and subordination processes.

3. Language revitalisation efforts

Numerous attempts of reversing language shift can be found in the Ryukyu Islands. These consist of grass-roots level activities aiming mainly at cultural revitalisation. Hara (2005) provides for a detailed discussion thereof.

3.1. Reversing language shift activities

Reversing language shift activities can be ascertained since the time the first Ryukyuan graduated from mainland universities (see Iha, 1969[1916] and Kinjo, 1944 for early instances). However, such efforts proved to be ineffective. The attempts of countering language attrition were interrupted for several decades after 1945 when Ryukyuan reacted with heightened Japanese (language) nationalism to the American occupation of the Ryukyu Islands which ended only in 1972 (Heinrich, 2004). From the 1980s onwards cultural associations (*bunka kyokai*) in local communities have emerged in an ever growing number throughout the Ryukyu Islands. Today more than half of the local communities have such a cultural association. The year 1995 marks a decisive break in Ryukyuan attempts of cultural revitalisation as it saw the establishment of the Okinawa Cultural Association (*Okinawa bunka kyukai*) which serves as a platform to all local cultural associations in Okinawa Prefecture. In 2000, revitalisation efforts were furthermore advanced by the establishment of the Council for the Promotion of the Okinawa Dialect (*Okinawa hogen fukyu kyogikai*). The Council aims at spreading Ryukyuan, and at establishing service centres at elementary and high schools where elderly speakers of Ryukyuan can teach the language. It has also developed a Ryukyuan orthography and publishes the quarterly Okinawa Dialect Newspaper (*Okinawa hogen shinbun*). Since 1996, the council organises the annual Island's Speech Contest Meeting (*Shima nu kutuba sani katayabira taikai*).

The activities of the Council for the Promotion of the Okinawa Dialect complement already existing efforts of language revitalisation. Other speech contests exist, the oldest being that on Amami Oshima, which goes back to 1980. On Okinawa Island, the Society for Ryukyuan (*Unchinaguchi-kai*) organises monthly discussion circles in which every participant gives a ten minute speech. There are competitions of local poetry (*ryuka*) and folk songs (*min'yo*). Furthermore, the radio dialect news (*hogen nyusu*) is broadcast twice a week. Textbooks of Ryukyuan such as Yoshiaki Funatsu's 'Beautiful Dialect of Okinawa' (*Utsukushii Okinawa no hogen*) have been published and Saburo Kitamura has translated the modern Japanese classic 'I am a Cat' (*Wagahai wa neko de aru*) by Soseki Natsume into Ryukyuan.

The efforts of language revitalisation discussed above represent ambitious endeavours to repair language loyalty and to revitalise the language. Nonetheless, it is obvious that these efforts are not sufficient. The main problem is that these measures themselves display traces of progressive erasure process. To start with, Ryukyuan continues to be fragmented in that it does not serve, for instance, as a language of school instruction. Usually, however, reversing language shift measures directly aim at challenging the fragmentation of Ryukyuan in that the language is used in domains and contexts where Japanese would be the expected choice. Such language use has consequences. Using Ryukyuan in contexts in which it has fallen out of use (e.g. literature) or where it has never been used (e.g. news coverage) creates noticeable language problems (see Hokama, 1991:63-69 for a discussion). These problems have their basis in the fragmentation, marginalisation and

sublimation of Ryukyuan. In the framework of progressive erasure these language revitalisation measures display features of marginalisation and sublimation in absence of fragmentation.

Figure 3: Reversing language shift activities and progressive erasure

	fragmentation	marginalisation	sublimation
speech contests	no	yes	yes
dialect newspaper	no	yes	yes
dialect radio news	no	yes	yes
translations of Japanese classics	no	yes	yes

Although the above mentioned efforts aim at revitalising Ryukyuan, they also shed light on the decline of the language through the problems that emerge in the process. Let us briefly consider these.

In the first case of figure 3, Ryukyuan serves as the medium of public speeches. Ryukyuan speech events thus counter the usual practice of using Japanese in public speeches. However, effects of Ryukyuan marginalisation in Ryukyuan speech contests become evident by the fact that extensive preparations are necessary for Ryukyuan presentations, in spite of the fact that everyday matters are the subject of most speeches. Furthermore, comprehension on the side of the listeners is often inhibited to an extent that translation into Japanese is necessary. Sublimation is already perceptible because a speech on everyday issues is thought to be something worthwhile being presented to a larger audience – if only the language used is Ryukyuan. In short, the language in itself is the message, and it is only so because the language is marked.

Publication of the dialect newspaper, too, challenges the existing allocation of functions between Japanese and Ryukyuan in that Ryukyuan serves as a medium of writing, above that, the prestigious text-type of news coverage. The news in Ryukyuan is primarily published because of the prestige of journalistic writing. Nevertheless, the dialect news displays features of marginalisation in the way that it is only published quarterly and is distributed for free. Obviously, the Ryukyuan newspaper does not serve the same functions its Japanese counterparts do. Furthermore, writing newspaper articles in Ryukyuan is not an easy endeavour, since Ryukyuan lacks much vocabulary necessary for coverage of fields such as politics or economy (Hokama, 2001:97). While the news is now written in Ryukyuan the language is not used for less prestigious text-types such as, for instance, billboards. Fragmentation, marginalisation and sublimation is the reason why.

Broadcast of radio news basically runs into the same problems which were depicted above. Although Ryukyuan is spoken in this case, language problems remain prominent and result in extensive borrowing from Japanese. The overall pattern by now is clear, Ryukyuan reversing language shift activities focus on the use of the language in contexts

where Japanese is the expected and normal choice. The result is language problems which reveal the erasure processes that Ryukyuan has undergone in the past 120 years. We encounter the same phenomena again with translations from Japanese into Ryukyuan. Few, if any, reader would choose Saburo Kitamura's Ryukyuan translation of the classic novel 'I am a Cat' for the sake of accommodativeness. Neither the translation (the book includes long discussions about Japanese modernisation) nor the reading of the Ryukyuan version can be an easy endeavour. There is thus no reason to presuppose that anybody in the Ryukyu Islands would find the Ryukyuan translation more convenient than the Japanese original. Again, the translation does not follow functional prerequisites such as the lack of proficiency in Japanese. Translations into Ryukyuan only make sense if the original work is already known. The use of Ryukyuan is first and foremost symbolic - hence, the translation of *the* modern Japanese classic novel. Anything less would simply not do for a symbolic act. Progressive erasure also takes to the effect that we should not expect all those who own a copy to have actually read it. As a matter of fact, Kitamura's translation serves as a popular souvenir among mainland visitors who, as a rule, lack any proficiency of Ryukyuan.

3.2. An assessment of and outlook on reversing language shift activities

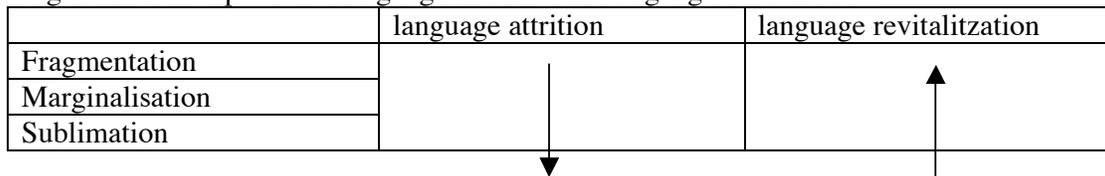
Language revitalisation is an ambitious goal. It is a difficult and lengthy project. Reversing language shift is usually an endeavour of the few against the many and the poor against the rich (Fishman, 2001:6). This being so, scholarly insights into language shift and efforts at reversing language shift in other speech communities are pivotal for the development of effective and successful measures.

Several lessons can be learned from existing sociolinguistic studies for the case the Ryukyu Islands. In order to assess the degree a language has receded, Fishman (1991) has developed a Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale which ranges from 0 (no evidence of decline) to 8 (seriously endangered). Ryukyuan places at scale 7 in most contexts. The criteria formulated by Fishman (1991:89) for stage 7 apply to most speakers of Ryukyuan, in that they "are socially integrated and ethnolinguistically active population but [...] beyond child-bearing age." Fishman's (1991:91) description of reversing language shift activities which can frequently be found at stage 7 also reflects the situation in the Ryukyu Islands, in that (1) symbolic use of the language prevails (e.g. in speech contests, arts, entertainment etc.), (2) activities often focus on the interests of older speakers, and (3) the means of reversing language shift (e.g. speech contests) are frequently taken to be the end of language revitalisation. Reversing language shift activities which display such characteristics are insufficient, in the Ryukyu Islands as anywhere else. It is therefore likely that Ryukyuan will further regress unless new reversing language shift measures are implemented in addition.

There are also lessons to be learned from an analysis along the lines of the progressive erasure approach. It demonstrates that symbolic use of Ryukyuan displays features of progressive erasure itself. Rather than providing for yet more instances of symbolic

language use, reversing language shift activities have to focus on the private domain, that is to say on language use in families and neighbourhoods. More than anything else, reversing language shift activities have to create a basis for intergenerational language transmission. As an effect, reversing language shift schemes must change their focus from older speakers towards younger people not (sufficiently) proficient in Ryukyuan. At the present stage, Ryukyuan reversing language shift activities cannot tackle processes of marginalisation and fragmentation. Existing activities aiming at challenging fragmentation processes must thus be perceived as what they are, efforts to attract interest into the language and its revitalisation efforts. However important these activities might be, it should be clear that they constitute merely means, not ends, of language revitalisation. There is no alternative to wide-spread intergenerational oral proficiency in the private domain if the language is to be revitalised. Wide-spread intergenerational oral proficiency in the private domain is characteristic of the next-lower stage (stage 6) in Fishman's (1991) model. The general message is thus that reversing language shift has to return along the same path through which language attrition has evolved.

Figure 4: Development of language attrition and language revitalisation



To conclude, no symbolic language use can substitute the necessity to spread Ryukyuan at home and in the neighbourhood as the language of choice in informal spoken communication. If Ryukyuan is to be revitalised, speakers of Ryukyuan have to spread the language in their families and neighbourhoods. Nobody else can do it and nothing else will do. Diglossic bilingualism must be sought first before more ambitious planning goals can be targeted.

Endnotes:

[1] Arvanitika is a variety of Albanian spoken in northern Greece.

[2] Nagata's study aside, linguistic research of Ryukyuan has neglected the study of language change in Ryukyuan under the influence of Standard Japanese. In that way, the linguistic research agenda itself provides for an instance of marginalisation. While interferences of Ryukyuan on Japanese are studied in much detail, interferences of Japanese on Ryukyuan are left unnoticed. The language ideological notion behind the unbalanced research agenda is clear: Ryukyuan cannot be corrupted by Japanese. Needless to say, in that way Ryukyuan linguistics is part and parcel of the marginalisation process.

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