

Survival of the Language: Research and Practice on Preservation of the endangered languages

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About half of the world's 6,000 to 8,000 languages are expected to disappear this century "if action is not taken now." The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) reports that there are eight such "endangered languages" in Japan (Ainu, Hachijo and six Ryukyu languages), but if we include most of the dialects of mainland Japan and their subcategories (dialects), which vary by region and village, the number of languages in danger of disappearing is much larger.

If we think about it, the term "threatened languages" may contain a value judgment. In other words, there may be an assumption that extinction is bad. It would be nice to say that endangered languages should be protected, just as news that a wildlife species is threatened with extinction raises concerns about protection... but things are more complicated than that.

What is a language?

Humans have always had a keen interest in language. In ancient times, Aristotle's Logic and Panini's Sanskrit Grammar examined language, and it continues to be explored in modern times, with examples including Saussure's work on synchronic language and Chomsky's work on universal grammar. Today, linguistics covers a wide range of fields, from phonology, morphology, and syntax, which explore the structure of language itself, to sociolinguistics and applied linguistics, which study the events associated with language.

The answer to the question, "What is language?" should be clearly defined according to the purpose of the study, but if we simply ask, "What are the characteristics of language?" we cannot claim that language is a "perfect tool for communication," although it is certainly a means of communicating with others. A toddler and his mother, or an elderly couple who have been together for many years can communicate without using language. Conversely, feelings that cannot be put into words and misunderstandings that arise from the use of language suggest that language cannot easily be called the "optimal means of communication."

The body is a linguistic entity

A child born into a particular language community cannot choose not to acquire the language of that community in its typical environment and development. In this respect, acquisition of language is a universal human trait, just as, for example, one cannot choose not to learn to

walk, but one can choose not to learn to ride a bicycle. In this sense, our body is a linguistic entity.

There is a Czechoslovak proverb: “Mit jeder neu erlernten Sprache erwirbst du eine neue Seele” (“With every new language you learn, you acquire a new soul.”) This proverb tells us that even in a second language we are linguistic beings whose acquisition process is different from that of the first language (mother tongue).

And language is a physical being

Language is acquired as a universal human trait and exists in the individual as a mental representation in the brain. Therefore, the lifespan of a language is the same as the lifespan of a human being. This is shown by the fact that a language disappears when the “last speaker” of that language also disappears. In this sense, we can say that a language is a physical entity.

However, language can persist beyond the lifespan of an individual, even if it gradually changes. This is enabled by the intergenerational transmission of language. A group of people who speak the same language forms a community, and the intergenerational transmission of language helps to maintain that community. If this intergenerational transmission is interrupted, there is a risk that the language will disappear.

Fighting languages

The study of endangered languages is often seen in the same context as the conservation of endangered species: the preservation of diversity and the loss of human ability to communicate. However, from another perspective, from the “linguistic side,” it can be seen as helping a struggling language to achieve infinite existence through intergenerational transmission, even if it lives within the finite lifespan of an individual. In this sense, it can be said that the research of the author and his colleagues on endangered languages in the Ryukyu Islands, particularly on the maintenance and preservation of languages through intergenerational transmission, is driven by language.

Language is something that exists within humanity, something that individuals recognize as their own identity, but it is also something that makes us feel the presence of something beyond the individual, such as the history and wisdom of communities that share the same language. Here is a saying from the Yonaguni language (Yonaguni Island, Yaeyama Prefecture, Okinawa) that expresses just that.

“Munui bachitaya chima bachirun (If you forget this language, you will forget this island).
Chima bachitaya uya bachirun (If you forget this island, you will forget your parents).”

In many parts of Ryukyu, parents, elders and ancestors are very important as support for people in the present. (Incidentally, the word "Ayah" in the Okinoerabu language (Okinoerabu Island, Oshima Prefecture, Kagoshima) refers to both living and non-living ancestors. The Yonaguni proverb presented above can be explained as follows: The loss of Munui (the language of the island) leads to the loss of Chima (the island), the homeland, the

community that shares the same language, and the history and wisdom woven by Uya (the parents), elders and ancestors.

Reflecting on the people who speak the language

In this way, the perspective of the “language” cannot be separated from the perspective of the “individuals who acquire that language and the communities that share it.” It is therefore natural to see the crisis of the disappearance of languages not from the point of view of external constraints such as the preservation of diversity or the loss of human means of communication, but from the recognition that our language has a value in itself. There are many languages that have disappeared, and if there were only one language in the world, communication would be smooth, the world would be unified, and conflict could be reduced. However, human history has not allowed this to happen. To some extent we try to connect with homogeneous groups, but beyond that we try to distinguish ourselves from others. It seems to me that what is natural for humans to do also happens with language. In this respect, it also becomes clearer when we consider “language” and “people as a language community” together.

I mentioned earlier that my research on the passing on of endangered languages is language-driven, but you could also say that it is driven by language communities. And I don’t think it’s too strong to say that languages are physical and that languages are the people who speak them. As I mentioned before, a language disappears, when the life of its “last speaker” ends.

Language communities and scientific research

The preservation and passing on of languages requires the commitment of every member of the language community. Speakers of the language need to increase input as much as possible for the younger generation, who must do their best to learn the language, and an environment needs to be created where children can acquire the language as a first language. It is the language that must be protected, but it is the members of the language community who are responsible for achieving that protection. In other words, helping to fight for the language means helping to fight for the language community. Although there is very little that an individual researcher can do, I describe below my activities and research approach on Okinoerabu Island (Wadomari Town and China Town in Oshima-gun, Kagoshima Prefecture).

Our work on Okinoerabu Island

One of the tasks of researchers of endangered languages is to describe the grammatical phenomena of Ryukyu languages, that is, to describe the structure of the language (detached from humans). It was for this purpose that the author and his colleagues came to Okinoerabu Island in the first place. But through the research reports we made almost every time we did fieldwork every few months, from island-wide events at the municipal culture hall to impromptu events at village community centers, we felt deeply that studying a language meant confronting the language community. We learned firsthand that the people of the island

wanted to preserve a living language by passing it down from generation to generation, rather than preserving language records in a museum.

I now believe that many people attended the above lectures and workshops because “our friends (the author and his colleagues) have come all the way from Tokyo,” or because they were invited by friends who thought this. As “friends” we also weeded fields, cleaned up rivers, and helped prepare and clean up after community events, but what else should we do as “researcher friends”?

Activities to pass on and preserve languages as academic research

Language researchers have the expertise and skills to create language materials for museums, such as grammatical descriptions, dictionaries, and fragmentary audio and video recordings, and we believe that our gratitude to the islanders is reflected in using this knowledge and skill to pass on and preserve the language of the island. In other words, language researchers should be used as one resource.

Based on this idea, we supported the islanders in acquiring knowledge and skills useful for documenting and passing on their language through one-time lectures and workshops and regular talks at community centers. We also produced picture books using the island language to keep the momentum going and keep things “fun.” These activities are sometimes understood as social contributions, such as “payback for academic results” or “outreach” (and the authors do sometimes say this depending on the context), but we think they are the most appropriate activities for the purposes of research on passing on and preserving languages. This may be beyond the scope of existing academic activities, but both the researchers and the islanders are participants in a project to protect the endangered language - the fight for the languages - and we believe that what each needs to function most effectively is a “payback for academic results.” As a researcher and a living person, I believe this is the best solution.

Endangered language research is not literary research, but a research project that asks questions of living, breathing human beings, such as “How do you say XXX in your dialect? “Can you say XXX in this context?” It is fieldwork where you collect data by constantly asking questions. At this point, we had to decide whether to separate the language from the people and focus on describing the structure and system of the language itself, as did the early authors who focused (only) on grammatical description, or depart from the naturalist approach and accept the value judgment that “this language is worth preserving” and (also) make efforts to pass on and preserve the language.

As I mentioned earlier, it is impossible to separate “language” from “the people who speak it,” and this is especially true in language research, in particular endangered language research. This is because, as I have said repeatedly, a language disappears when the “last speaker” of that language dies. Writing a grammar reference book or compiling a comprehensive dictionary is not something that can be done in one’s spare time. However, as a researcher working with people, a message is sent by “what you do not do.” For example, if we focus only on grammatical descriptions, I think we need to be aware that the members of the language community who provide the data will think, “This person is interested in our

language, but not in our lives.” It is simply difficult for a researcher to both document and try to pass on and preserve a language, and I believe that future research on endangered languages will require that researchers who do the documentation and researchers who do the work to pass on and preserve the language work together, just as the authors worked together with the language community.

Studying endangered languages means confronting the human condition head-on, and regardless of whether the researcher is engaged in efforts to pass on and preserve the language or not, one must be prepared to do so as a researcher and as a human being. In short, we researchers are all participants in the fight for languages. This is how I see it.