

Reporting on endangered languages and dialects in Japan: Their recording,
conservation, and transmission

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In 2009, UNESCO reported that approximately 2,500 languages in the world are at risk of extinction (“Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger”). Eight languages spoken in Japan are on the list: Ainu in Hokkaido, Yonaguni, Yaeyama, Miyako, Okinawan and Kunigami in Okinawa, Amami in Kagoshima, and Hachijō in Tokyo. In addition, dialects of Japanese that are not on the list are also in danger of extinction. This progressed as a consequence of suppressing dialects to promote the standardization of Japanese until around 1970 as well as a rapid drift of population from country to city after 1945. For example, schools in Okinawa, Kagoshima and Tohoku regions forced students who used their dialect to wear a tag called ‘Hōgenfuda’ as a punishment. In order to record and conserve these languages and dialects, NINJAL has led a collaborative research project ‘Endangered Languages and Dialects in Japan’ since 2010.

In this presentation, I will introduce the kinship terminologies in Kikai-jima dialect in Kagoshima and Yonaguni dialect in Okinawa, which is different from standard Japanese in terms of the following;

- In Kikai-jima dialect, there is a change whereby ‘jakkii’ and ‘anii’ originally referred to elder brother and sister but are now used for father and mother. In addition, ‘zjuu’ and ‘ammaa’ for father and mother has shifted to grandfather and grandmother. It suggests a move of the kinship terms drifting one generation up.
- In Yonaguni dialect, ‘ubuda’ is used when younger brothers call the eldest brother while younger sisters use ‘ubja’. They differentiate the kinship terms by gender of a referrer.

These features are linguistically and culturally invaluable. NINJAL has been creating and storing records and also supporting activities and events for passing down the languages and dialects to the next generation.