Research on Endangered Ryukuan Dialects with an Aim to Preserve and Propagate

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[Background]
UNESCO announced in February 2009 that of the over six thousand languages spoken in the world, 2500 are in danger of becoming extinct. Among them are Japan’s Ryukyuan languages (UNESCO treats each Ryukyuan dialect as a separate language). Although experts have long been aware of the threat to the dialects, and research on their preservation and propagation has been ongoing for more than 30 years, the inclusion of Ryukyuan languages in the UNESCO statement came as a shock.

[Results]
The people of the Ryukyu Islands account for about one percent of Japan’s population, and the Ryukyuan languages are spoken only by a small minority. The islands are spread out over a large area -- the distance between the northernmost, Amami Oshima Island, and the westernmost, Yonakuni Island, is equal to that between Miyagi Prefecture in northern Japan and Hiroshima Prefecture, near the western edge of Honshu Island. Across this huge area, the various Ryukyuan dialects are as rich in variation as the numerous Japanese dialects.

The dialect of the Sani settlement, located in the northern part of Amami Oshima Island, differentiates between the seven short and long vowels /a, ò, i/ and /ê/ for a total of 18 vowels. But the dialect of Yonakuni Island, the westernmost island in Japan, primarily uses the three vowels a, i and u. The Miyako Ookami Island dialect has only 10 consonants: /p, t, k, f, v, s, m, n/ and /h/. But it has been discovered that the consonants /f, v, s, m/ and n are used as monosyllables, that the /l/ and /s/ in words such as /kiki/ (make) and /pstu/ (person) function as vowels in a syllable, and that there are also long and short consonants, with some words that are just single long consonants, such as /mì/sweet potato), /sì/ (nest) and /vì/(sell). The phonetic characteristics of the Sani and Oogami Islands are very distinctive and do not appear in any other Japanese dialects.

We are also working on grammatical research of the southern Ryukyuan dialects, an area that has been little studied. We have known that the Ryukyuan languages retain the kakari-musubi (linked form) principle of classical Japanese. The Miyako Island dialect uses the connecting particles du (equivalent to the classical Japanese zo), ga (ka) and nu (nan). The particle ga is spoken in the interrogative, and nu in yes-or-no questions, to enable the speaker to add extra meaning to his question. The Ryukyuan languages shed light on the history of the Japanese language, and have many interesting linguistic typological features.

[Outlook]
Urgent research is needed on the Ryukyuan languages in order to pass them down to future generations. Since the languages are structurally complex and systematic, dictionaries and grammars must be put together and published. Study of the Koki settlement in Nago-shi, Okinawa Prefecture, is underway to compile a lexicon of its dialect (Fig. 1). The dictionary will contain about 20,000 words and, after completion, will be made available to the public along with the recorded phonetic material, as part of Ryukyu University’s speech database on Ryukyu Languages (ryukyu-lang.lib.u-ryukyu.ac.jp) (Fig. 2). We also plan to compile a database of the grammatical information we have collected.

Related Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research:
FY2008-2010 Grant-in-Aid for Scientific research (B): "Basic Research on the Grammar of the South Ryukyu Dialect"