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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Back to the Future: Language Reclamation with Land and Ocean

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Abstract

Endangered languages in linguistically diverse areas have relatively few options and less peer support for adult L2 language learning. To counteract the lack of good language learning support from their peers, I created a network with my colleagues to help local adults learn and reclaim their language in their communities on the Ryukyuan Islands. This study analyzes learner and new speakers' perspectives from a case of language reclamation of Indigenous languages, including multiple grassroots projects of language revitalization. With resilience and audacity to break multiple silences, learners experienced a sense of connection and healing in reclaiming their ancestral heritage languages. The concept of time seems to be relative in the participants' eyes. By remembering their history and connecting with Elders, the new speakers start to be more connected to the land and the ocean of/around the islands. From learners' narratives, we can observe that while second language learners become "speakers" of their ancestral languages, they are going *back to the future* through gaining their ancestral memories and lived experiences of their family histories.

Keywords

language reclamation; Ryukyu islands; time; youth

INTRODUCTION

Time, in the conventional sense, is often understood as a linear progression, with clear divisions between the past, present, and future. However, in the process of language reclamation within Indigenous communities, time can be interpreted more fluid, relative, and interconnected with memory, identity, and place (Hau'Ofa, 2008; Uzawa, 2019). Indigenous language learning is distinctly different from foreign or dominant language learning on many levels due to its ontological and axiological stances around Indigenous language revitalization in relevant contexts. Hence, Indigenous language learning is also an emotional journey for people with heritage in Indigenous communities due to its place in a colonized world where dominant languages and knowledges are prioritized. For example, during the process of language learning, many Indigenous youths experience linguistic insecurity where they feel their language is not "good enough" due to negative language attitudes that native speakers often carry because of their history of colonialism and linguistic assimilation (Hammine, 2020; Ravindranath & Quinn, 2017). This study explores how time should be

understood differently within the context of endangered Indigenous language revitalization efforts, particularly through the lens of adult language learners of the Ryukyuan languages on the islands of the Ryukyus, located in the southern part of modern-day Japan.

This study examines the experiences of new speakers reclaiming their heritage Ryukyuan languages, either in the language revitalization efforts supported by a regional government or on their own in language revitalization groups. Leonard (2019) defines language reclamation differently from language revitalization as it focuses on the perspectives of community members involved in language revitalization programs. I follow Leonard's definition of language reclamation as "a larger effort by a community to claim its right to speak a language and to set associated goals in response to community needs and perspectives" (Leonard, 2012, p. 359). Through the narratives of the new speakers (O'Rourke et al., 2015) of Ryukyuan languages, it becomes clear that the act of language reclamation involves more than simply acquiring new linguistic skills; it is also a journey that brings learners back to their childhood memories and family/community histories. As participants reconnect with their ancestral languages, they experience a reawakening of "youth," not in the biological sense, but through a renewal of their cultural and historical identity. This challenge to the conventional notion of youth highlights how time can be perceived differently in the process of language learning by learners and new speakers of Indigenous languages, which is a cyclical return to the future rather than a linear progression forward.

By exploring the relationships between language, memory, and time, this paper argues that adult learners, in reclaiming their language, are not merely speaking the past but are re-enacting a collective heritage that is always present in their lived experiences. Hence, they are bringing the past into the future. The reclamation of language, in this sense, is inseparable from the reclamation of place, environments—land and ocean, which serve as living teachers of ecological knowledge and traditional practices (Meighan, 2024; Oshiro, 2024; Wehi et al., 2009). In the conclusion section, I argue that, through this process, learners experience a sense of connection and healing, both to their cultural heritage and to the environment that surrounds them.

ACADEMIC DISCOURSES OF LANGUAGE SHIFT, ENDANGERMENT, AND REVITALIZATION

Over the past several decades, academic discussions have highlighted the urgent need to respond to the global decline of linguistic diversity, particularly emphasizing how

intergenerational language transmission has been disrupted (Fishman, 1991, 2001; Hale et al., 1992). Research on language shift and endangerment often explores both the underlying factors—such as societal language ideologies—and the broader consequences, including the erosion of the world's linguistic heritage. In contrast, scholarship on language maintenance and revitalization tends to concentrate on more applied strategies for fostering new speakers of minority, heritage, or ancestral languages (Hinton & Hale, 2013).

The "endangerment paradigm" that is used in linguistics over decades has been criticized for its nature to provide "solutions" to the problems of language loss through theoretical frameworks and support to research projects aimed at documenting and/or revitalizing Indigenous languages (Duchene & Heller, 2008 as cited in Hammine & Tsutsui-Billins, 2022). Along with this development, many studies have demonstrated that discourses of endangerment, far from having the emancipatory effects usually claimed, can contribute to perpetuate domination, discrimination, racial prejudice, and exploitation of Indigenous communities (see Costa, 2016; Davis, 2017; Duchêne & Heller, 2007; Hill, 2002; Muehlmann, 2013; Roche, 2020).

Linguists who study language endangerment often privilege the perspectives of the "older generation," or native speakers, over the younger generations who are more likely to be non-native speakers of Indigenous languages. Due to cultural and linguistic assimilation and colonization in Indigenous communities, youth who reclaim Indigenous languages might be speakers of a dominant language and learn the Indigenous language as a heritage language. During language reclamation, community youth's perspectives on how they experience their language reclamation journey differ from those of people who belong to a dominant group and learn a language without any connection to the language (Fjellgren & Huss, 2019; Nicholas, 2009; Ravindranath & Quinn, 2017). For example, community members might encounter community elders who say that "the youth do not care about the language" or "you are too young to speak the language" (Hammine, 2020), or experienced teachers who report that the changes young heritage or second-language students are creating in the language are "wrong" (Ravindranath & Quinn, 2017). Langer and Nesse (2012, p. 608) describe this phenomenon as linguistic purism, which historical linguist Trask (1999, p. 254) defines as the belief that foreign words or linguistic features contaminate the purity of a language.

Linguistic purism also interferes with language standardization and language reclamation. The standardization of languages has historically played a central role in nation-

building, and similar processes in language revitalization efforts can stigmatize certain, often smaller, linguistic varieties or cultural expressions within endangered language communities, framing them as impure or even threatening to collective identity. Through language revitalization, Indigenous languages often produce a new form, or a new variety of languages, that fits into modern life. Thus, language reclamation should not be viewed as a return to an imagined "pure" or unaltered form of an ancestral language.

Instead, it is a dynamic, multifaceted, heteroglossic, and multivocal process through which individuals across different generations reclaim linguistic and cultural knowledge that was suppressed or lost under colonial rule. Language reclamation involves innovation, adaptation, and negotiation, reflecting the lived realities of speakers across generations. In light of this, it is worth asking: What do the youth have to say about the matter? Are they truly turning away from the language, or are they reshaping it in ways that challenge conventional notions of linguistic authenticity? As Wyman et al. (2014) point out, the "commonplace rhetorics of endangerment … tend to invisibilize youth perspectives, concerns, and practices within language reclamation efforts" (p. 2). A more inclusive approach to revitalization must acknowledge and embrace the evolving forms and functions of language as practiced by younger generations.

By using the term "new speaker" (O'Rourke et al., 2015), language reclamation researchers challenge the belief in the automatic complete competence of "native speakers" in their "native languages" (Doerr, 2009, p. 39). The concept of the new speaker focuses on the process of language learning. It also shows that linguistic competence is a product of a complex process involving education, language, and cultural policies in a given society. Challenging these beliefs around "native speakers" and "competence" is important in language reclamation, where language learners learn Indigenous minoritized languages as heritage languages. The concept of the "new speaker" raises questions about "nativeness" as a source of authority and as a target in the upward movement of language revitalization and the creation of new speakers.

The concept entails hope for the future. Here, I refer to "hope" for communities including new speakers, elders, and non-Indigenous peoples who work with Indigenous peoples in those communities. Lear (2008) explains the concept of radical hope as a unique form of hope that persists in the face of profound adversity and cultural devastation that many Indigenous peoples continuously face. The new speaker evokes "an upward movement away from language shift and loss rather than an inevitable downward slope" (Jaffe, 2015, p.23).

New speakers connect the past with the future, connecting traditional knowledge with the future.

New speakers have been largely ignored as a linguistic group in the Ryukyuan contexts, despite the fact that such speakers are a necessary part of reversing language shift (RLS) in minoritized endangered languages (Costa, 2015; Jaffe, 2015; O'Rourke et al., 2015). The lack of focus on new speakers results from native speakers often being considered as the only legitimate representatives of a linguistic community. While the role of new speakers is crucial in language revitalization, previous studies of newspeakerness have often overlooked what roles Elders and ancestors play in relation to new speakers during the process of language reclamation. In addition, there is a gap in how land, ocean, environment, and place connect to new speakers' construction of identities. Therefore, I investigate the following questions:

1. How do community members who are new speakers of Ryukyuan experience language reclamation?
2. How can we understand the experiences of youth in language reclamation?

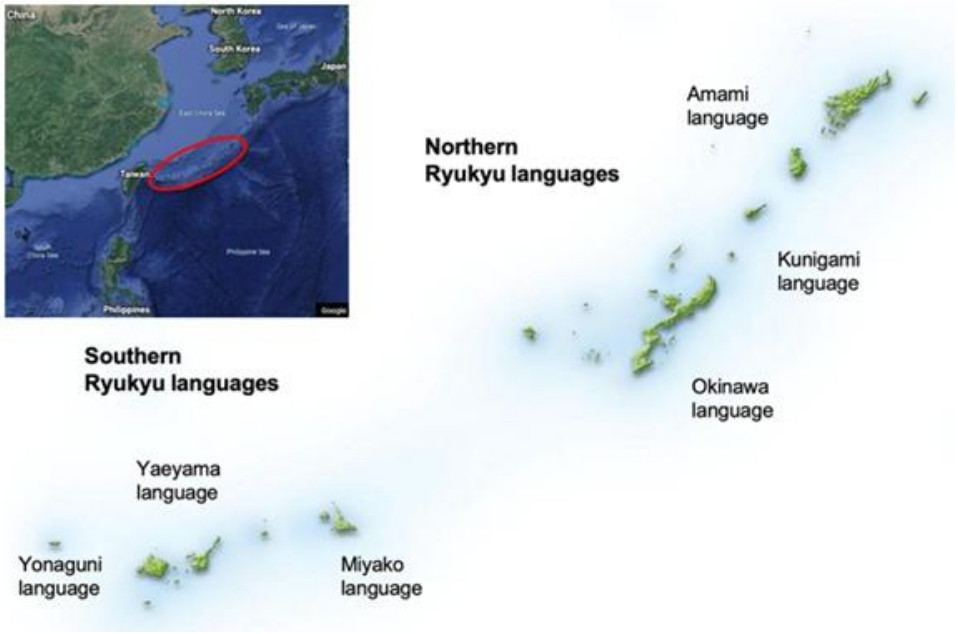
CONTEXT

East Asia is home to a wide array of minority and Indigenous languages, including but not limited to the Ainu language in Japan, the Zhuang and Tibetan languages in China, and the many Indigenous languages of Taiwan (Bradley, 2007; Dal Corso & Kim, 2022; Janhunen, 2005; Roche et al., 2023). Non-official languages or linguistic varieties are often minoritized and excluded in education, employment, and society (Roche et al., 2023). The focus of this paper is on the Ryukyus Islands, where the author is from and has been working. I focus on the context of Indigenous language reclamation in the Ryukyus (see Figure 1). The Ryukyuan language family consists of at least five distinct languages, traditionally spoken in the Ryukyus, a chain of islands in the southwest region of Japan. According to the standards set out in the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger, the Ryukyuan languages are either definitely or severely endangered.

Although recognized by most linguists as sister languages of Japanese, as these two groups share common roots in the Japonic family, Ryukyuan languages have historically been treated in Japan as *hōgen*, or dialects of Japanese. They are still viewed as such by many Ryukyuan islanders. This view of Ryukyuan languages as hōgen resulted from an ideology of Japan as a monolingual nation (Heinrich, 2012) and has been a significant obstacle to language preservation in the Ryukyus. Due to the assimilation policy by the national

government, intergenerational transmission of Ryukyuan was mostly broken in the early 1950s, and most Ryukyuan people born since the 1970s are monolingual Japanese speakers (Anderson & Heinrich, 2014). A more recent study in one community in the Northern Ryukyus, on Okinoerabu Island, shows that people in their 40s have linguistic knowledge of their local languages and are therefore passive bilinguals of Japanese and the local language (Yokoyama & Kagoyama, 2019).

Figure 1. Ryukyuan Languages (Created by the author using Google Maps)



In linguistically diverse regions such as Ryukyuan, where languages are minoritized and endangered, adult second language (L2) acquisition opportunities are limited, and educational materials are scarce. For the Ryukyuan languages traditionally spoken in the southern part of modern-day Japan, this challenge is compounded by the absence of structured learning programs, support from peers, or learning materials for small varieties of Ryukyuan languages. To address this, the Master-Apprentice Language Learning Program (MAP), developed by Hinton et al. (2018), was adopted as a model for revitalizing these languages within local communities on Ishigaki, starting in 2019 (Hammine, 2024; Topping, 2023) and on Okinoerabu islands, starting in 2021 (Asahi Shimbun, 2024; Yamada, 2020).

Starting in Ishigaki, this approach is gradually expanding and is being used across the Ryukyus at the grassroots level. This program pairs Elder native speakers, or "masters," with adult learners, or "apprentices," who engage in a one-on-one learning process to reclaim their

language. Moreover, a group of new speakers is emerging in different regions of the Ryukyus both through local initiatives and through different collaborative projects with researchers (e.g., Sakihara & Oyakawa, 2021; NPO-hands-on, n.d.; Topping, 2023; Yamada, 2020; Zlazli, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

This research draws from a framework of Indigenous Methodologies (Kovach, 2015, 2021; Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008). Fundamental to Indigenous Methodologies is the recognition that language is a social practice. Consequently, working with an endangered language entails social engagement with careful consideration of social dynamics and needs that underline language use (e.g., Whaley, 2011). By employing Indigenous Methodologies as a research framework, I view science as inseparable from art, religion and Indigenous knowledge as being approached through one's senses and intuitions (Wilson, 2008). Science in Indigenous Methodologies consists of and is based on Indigenous knowledge systems of the land and water. In this framework, research is understood as a holistic process of decolonization, focusing on the resiliency and resistance of Indigenous peoples.

As Smith (1999, p. 41) writes, "decolonization is not the rejection of Western theories but rather, it is about centering Indigenous peoples' concerns and worldviews and then coming to know and understand theory and research from our own perspective and for our own purposes". Therefore, Indigenous Methodologies as a framework enables the researcher to focus on instances where new speakers from Ryukyuan communities face difficulties or struggles during the language learning process. This framework allows me to focus on not only the mere acquisition of a language, but also participants' feelings and emotions concerning their language learning journey. Indigenous methodologies enable our Indigenous experiences to come forward, and I aim to provide a possible efflorescence of Indigenous languages and identities (Roche et al., 2018).

The author of this article is also a community member from the Ryukyus with two different heritage languages from the Ryukyu Islands. As a cultural insider researcher, this article is written from a perspective of language reclaimer, while her position at a Western university still influences the people and knowledge-making process. This research collected data from learners and new speakers of Ryukyuan (N=14) and fieldnotes in different language revitalization activities including a local symposium organized by the author and new speakers as a part of Shimakutuba Project (Shimakutuba Center, 2024). Based on

principles from an ethics committee of the author's home university in Okinawa, consent forms were created by the researcher and signed by all the participants. The data for this paper consisted of field notes from language learning classes[1] (N=35 classes/one hour each session, held online from the span of April 2022-October 2024), audio and video recordings of individual and focus group interviews with the participants, and in-formal gatherings for preparation of a public symposium on Okinawa Island.

Semi-structured interviews with individuals lasted from one to two hours. Participants' ages varied, but most of the new speakers, both male and female, were in their twenties to thirties. New speakers of Ryukyuan languages include both male and female speakers from their 20s to 40s. Using video and audio recorders, all the interviews were conducted using a mix of Ryukyuan languages and Japanese. Some of the interviews and classes were conducted using the online platform Zoom. To protect anonymity, all the names and individual information, including gender and names of villages and islands, are anonymized. The following analysis generated different themes related to endangerment, revitalization, and reclamation of Ryukyuan. The following section will summarize themes related to new speakerness in Ryukyuan.

FINDINGS

Creativity

Several individuals who identify as new speakers narrated an aspect of creativity. During our interviews, they all shared how they disseminate their language learning on social media such as X, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. For example, one of the new speakers of the Ryukyuan language narrated the following:

> なま　つくりうるでぃ　かきだそんが。何を作っているのって聞かれるのですが、すまむにで音楽を作っているんです。ご存知のように、八重山の人々は、歌と祭りが好きで、生活の一部です。(…) ですが，三線を手に持っていないと、なかなかすまむにも使わないというか。でも、若い世代は、自分たちで新しいものを作っていけるんです。例えば、Tシャツ、ソーシャルメディアを作ったり、琉球諸語を見せることができる。
>
> I am creating… then people ask what are you creating? I create songs in Yaeyama. Because, as you know, Yaeyaman people like music and festivals a lot…. Although many people are engaged in music and local festivals, in everyday life (…) *people do not use the Yaeyaman, unless they have a Sanshin (traditional musical instrument) in their hands.* But I think as younger generations, we can, and we should create new things like T-shirts or using the language in social media. *We can make the Ryukyuan visible*. (R.T., interview recorded in September 2024, emphasis added)

[1] The author hosts these online study group together with new speakers and these lessons continue until now in 2025.

R.T. is a new speaker in his 20s who learned the language of his island by attending an online course and by documenting the speeches of the Elders on the island. As narrated in the transcript, R.T. also practices traditional Ryukyuan music and creates music and posts on social media using the Indigenous language. Younger generations are learning music with the language, but people tend to switch back to Japanese in everyday life. Music and social media seem to play a role in the language reclamation of the Ryukyuan new speakers. Due to the lack of a language environment after the language shift, using the Ryukyuan languages in everyday life has become difficult. The lack of learning materials and textbooks in Ryukyuan is an ongoing problem in the Ryukyus. However, many new speakers learn Ryukyuan by creating their own materials, using social media, or music. Responding to R.T., another new speaker, M.K., also points out how her use of videos and films connects to her language learning:

> 同じように思います。ちまくとぅば、若い世代につなげたい。ばんたぬ ちまくとぅば、かっこいいんだよって、うぬ まーまんかいぬうむい、まっすぐな気持ち。(…) だからクリエイティブに仕事をしていて。私たちの世代が将来の子供達が、ちまくとぅばかっこいいんだよって、琉球諸語を学びたい人たちのモデルになれる。
>
> I think we feel the same, we want to transmit the language to the future generations. *Our language is cool*, this straight message. (…) I also create new music and short videos in Ryukyuan so that *children would think our language is cool* (...) that's why I work creatively. *Our generations can be models for children who can learn Ryukyuan languages as something new and cool.* (M.K., interview recorded in September 2024, emphasis added)

M.K. and R.T. create music using the Ryukyuan languages as their way of knowledge creation. M.K. touches upon the importance of changing the discourse around Ryukyuan languages from something old to something cool for the future generation. Their narratives' emphasis on "music and short videos" positions creativity as a method of cultural and linguistic transmission. This reflects a broader shift in many Indigenous and minoritized language movements, where digital and artistic expressions become modern vehicles for language reclamation for the younger generations who did not acquire Indigenous languages at home. Creativity as a theme to connect across generations and time seems to be a key theme among the experiences of Ryukyuan new speakers. In Japan, Maher (2005) already coined the principle of cool, using an example of the Ainu Indigenous festival in Hokkaido, northern Japan. Being "cool" includes a perceived ability to see the flipside or alternative side of things; an ability that multicultural perspective that ethnic minorities are uniquely believed to possess (Maher, 2005). By creating social media content in Indigenous languages, new speakers are expanding the domains of language use, particularly among the youth.

Relationship with the Community

In essence, learning Indigenous languages is not just about acquiring linguistic skills but also understanding and respecting the culture, history, and worldview of the Ryukyuan peoples (Matsumori, 1995). Here are some of the narratives from different new speakers of Ryukyuan who share the importance of connection to the ancestors and communities:

> わったー　うちなーぐちぇー　アメリカ口ぬぐとぅ、びんちょーさびたん。外国語を習得するように。なま、いふぃぐぁー　じょーじ　なとーいびーん。他の人から、ちゃーし　うちなーぐちびんちょーひちょーが、とぅか。私もやりたいんですけど。とか聞かれるんです。（…）　やいびーくとぅ　しーじゃ方とぅまーじょん　さんねーないびらんしが。（…）私の祖母は、もう亡くなっているのですが、祖母が「へーくけーれー」と言っていたその文法を一緒に勉強しました。例えば、私たちは新入生なので、文法を一緒に分解して、理解し共有して上手になってくるんです。
>
> We have learned Okinawan like we studied English as a second language. Now we have progressed little by little. Many people ask us….How did you study it? I would like to learn it. We have to revitalize the language together with elders, but we learned the language by doing this, by doing that…. *We must do this with the elders, my grandmother already passed away (...)* By learning it from my grandmother's speech, and we can understand grammar behind our speech by studying it together. *For example, we study the grammar behind my grandmother's speech together. So, we share how to learn the Ryukyuan with each other is important*. (E.M. interview recorded in September 2024, emphasis added)

Many Indigenous languages, such as Ryukyuan, are passed down orally through generations. Elders and knowledge keepers in the communities play a crucial role in preserving and transmitting these languages. For new speakers, especially those involved in language revitalization and reclamation, building respectful relationships with elders is essential—not only to learn the language authentically from primary sources, but also to honor the lived experiences, cultural context, and wisdom Elders carry. These insights cannot be found in textbooks alone and are vital for meaningful reclamation. The following comes from an interview with I.K., who has been leading one of the local grassroots efforts in Okinawa:

> 私たちのプロジェクトは、地域密着型なんです。辞書や文法書を片手に言語を学ぶことで、話せるようになるのかもしれないけど、十分じゃないんです。いろんな人と関わることで、皆さんが持っている経験とか記憶、そして「うむい」も一緒に継承していきたいって思っている。それでいろんな人と繋がって、勉強しているんです。ことばだけじゃないというのはこれなんです。（…）流暢になることはできないかもしれないんですけど、ことばと一緒に「うむい」も伝えていきたいんです。
>
> Our project is grassroots in our region, land. If we use a dictionary or grammar book, *we might be able to learn to speak the language but that is not enough*. By connecting with everyone, I would like to transmit the memories, experiences, *umui* (desire, feelings, affection in Okinawan) together with the language. We connect with people and study the language together. That's why it is not only about the language…. *We might not be fluent or perfect but I think it is important to keep the umui together with the language*. (I.K., interview recorded in September 2024, emphasis added)

The above narration from I.K., a new speaker of Ryukyuan, discusses coming together as a community through language revitalization. She also mentions the importance of respecting the *umui* (desire, affection and feelings) that come with the language. For many of the new speakers, language reclamation is not only about the language; it also connects to their memories, experiences, and feelings, together with the process of language reclamation (Leonard, 2019).

ばんだー　あっぱーや、スマムニで家の中の、ヒヌカンとか、先祖への祈りをしていたんです。（…）私の母は、しまくとぅばを話すことはできないのですが、聞いてわかるんです。ばんだー　あっぱーや　まーらほーりたそんが、いつも熱いお茶を淹れてくれたんです。お葬式で、熱いお茶が出て来て。（…）私たちの先祖や、祖母は、大切な自分の一部だと思ったんです。だから、熱いお茶を飲むときに、祖母を思い出し、すまむにも思い出す。ここにいるのは、先祖がいたからで、すまむにもそれを同時に思い出させて、帰ってこさせてくれる。

I grew up with my grandmother, who always spoke to spirits, the god of fire, and our ancestors in our island language…. My mother cannot speak the language of the island, but she can listen to it and understands it all (…) My grandmother passed away. She really liked hot tea when she was alive, and at her funeral, we were served hot tea.（…）*I realize our ancestors, our grandma, are an important part of who I am*. I remember my grandmother when I drink hot tea, *and it reminds me of my native tongue. So I am here because of my ancestors, language also reminds me of who I am, and it takes me back to my home*. (R.T., interview recorded in September 2024, emphasis added)

This sense of returning home through cultural objects such as hot tea was particularly notable when new speakers described how they felt “connected” again, not in the conventional sense of physical youth but as a rediscovery of their cultural identity. They spoke of feeling "reborn" through the language and remembering their ancestors, re-experiencing their connection to their ancestors as if time had bent back on itself. As another participant from Okinoerabu Island put it, “It feels like I’m learning something that’s always been inside me, something that belongs to my people. It’s like the past is becoming the present” (Interview with R.Y, September 2024).

Understanding time as cyclical also surfaced in how new speakers related their learning to the environment. Many new speakers in our communities described feeling more attuned to the rhythms of the land and ocean as they gained proficiency in the language. Language was not just a system of communication but a conduit for ecological knowledge, connecting them to the natural world. One new speaker remarked,

私の甥っ子が、標準語で話すのを聞いて、とても危機感を持っています。ことばを学ぶと、土地をどんなふうに見るかがわかるんです。土地をなんと呼ぶのかも、言葉だし、海、山も木も。だから土地の知識をことばを通して、伝えたい。どうして、この島で育って両親ともに島のひとなのに、この島のことばがわからないんだ？

When my nephews speak in Standard Japanese, I always feel anxious. The language teaches you *how to see the land*—what we call the land is also the language, it’s the ocean, the mountains, the trees. So I want

> to transmit the knowledge of the land through language to future generations. *Why did they speak in Standard Japanese, even though they grew up on the island with both native parents?* (H.M., interview recorded in September 2024, emphasis added)

In their narratives, both H.M. and R.T. show how they learn the language in connection with their ancestors and environment. R.T. shares how his memory of his grandmother is connected to hot tea. H.M. shares her experiences with her nephew. Their grandmother and nephews are connected in their memories and experiences of learning Indigenous languages. For new speakers like H.M. and R.S., learning the language is not just about memorizing words or grammar. It is a deeply rooted process that involves reconnecting with their cultural heritage and the land. It also relates to who they are, how they relate to their kin, and the land.

In this sense, learning the language was seen as a process that allowed time to fold back upon itself, where learners could simultaneously access knowledge of the past and present, embodied in the landscape around them (Engman & Hermes, 2021; Meighan, 2022). For new speakers, this implies that language learning is intertwined with identity, ancestry, and place. It suggests that language revitalization is not only linguistic but also spiritual and ecological. Learning the language becomes a way to honor their ancestors, sustain cultural continuity, and build a relationship with the environment that shaped their community's way of life.

This analysis of those narratives suggests that, for new speakers, time in the process of language reclamation is not fixed or linear. Instead, time in language reclamation is fluid and relative, shaped by both personal histories and communal narratives. For R.T., the hot tea and the shichi festival decorations remind him of a connection to his ancestors. It is the environment and space that connect him to the language. For H.M., memory also connects to how she views her nephews on the island. She wishes to transmit the language for the future, and her nephew's standard Japanese reminds her to work on language revitalization. Therefore, the reclamation and revitalization of local languages becomes an act of revisiting and re-experiencing a collective past and the future, one that is not lost but waiting to be rediscovered and revitalized.

By engaging with language in this way, new speakers are able to break through the silences created by language decline/loss, in academic terms, and reconnect to the living history of their community. In contrast to conventional educational models, where language learning in Indigenous language communities is often seen as a forward-moving process, it allows for a more fluid understanding of time. The mentor-apprentice relationship emphasized this cyclical nature. Elders did not simply impart knowledge from the past to the

future but guided new speakers in re-experiencing that knowledge together, as co-learners in the present. The sense of being both a teacher and a learner, bound by time yet transcending it, reflected the deep connection between language, memory, and community.

Revisiting the Concept of Time: Back to the Future?

An essential theme that emerged from the interviews and observation with new speakers in both the Maser Apprentice Initiative and other kinds of grassroots language revitalization is the unique way in which time is perceived and experienced. While language acquisition is often framed within the conventional understanding of time—as a linear process moving from the past into the present—new speakers demonstrated that their journeys were not linear but cyclical and intertwined with memory, identity, and place. For many new speakers, time was not merely an abstract concept, or a measure of years passed. Instead, it was something deeply connected to personal experiences and cultural heritage.

> コロナめーに　ハワイぬうちなーんちゅが　ぬーがら　オンラインさーに　イベントそーいびーたん。うんねーるとぅち、ハワイぬうちなーんちゅが、じこーどぅーぬくとぅとぅか、またうちなーぬくとぅ　くんねーる　うむい　じこーかたとーいびーたん。うちなーんちゅについてのアイデンティティも強く持っていたんです。そして、私は、そのときとても驚きました。どぅまんぎーびたん。（…）あんさーに、　わんねーうりしーぶさん。やいびーしが、どぅちゅいさーにうれーしーねーならん。うちなーんちゅであることがどういうことか、そして何を意味するのかということを言語化していくことに興味を持ちました。先祖の島に帰ってきて、今は、この言語の仕事を将来続けていきたいと思っています。
>
> Before COVID, I attended an event online and met *Uchinaanchu* in Hawai'i. It made me realize how *Uchinaanchu* in Hawai'i has a strong sense of being Okinawan. They were able to articulate who they are, they know much more about Okinawa than I did. When I saw that, I was very surprised. (…) *I want to do this work like them, but I could not do this work alone*. And then I became interested in how to articulate who I am and what it means to be Okinawan, part of it was a language. *Coming back to my ancestors and my island, I knew I wanted to do the work of language in the future*. (A.G., interview recorded in September 2024, emphasis added)

Some of the new speakers of the Ryukyuan crossed the ocean to learn about other Indigenous communities such as Hawai'i. A.G. is one example. The ocean connects different geographical areas, peoples and time. A recurring sentiment was that learning the language was akin to "returning" to a past that had never truly disappeared, even if it had been forgotten or obscured by generations of language loss. Perhaps, the act of coming back also refers to coming back to the future, as A.G. articulates, "Coming back to my ancestors and my island, I knew I wanted to do the work of language in the future." New speakers spoke of their experiences as a reawakening of long-dormant memories, often tied to their childhood or family history. As one new speaker from Ishigaki Island shared, "Learning the language is

like going back to my childhood. I feel like I'm reconnecting to something I've always known but couldn't express."

CONCLUSION

The process of language reclamation, as demonstrated through language reclamation activities, challenges conventional notions of time, identity, and language acquisition. The experiences of new speakers on different Ryukyuan Islands further emphasize the dynamic potential for language revitalization and reclamation. These new speakers, like those on Ishigaki island or Yaeyama islands, are not merely learning a language—they are reclaiming their connection to their community's historical narratives and ecological knowledge, offering hope for future generations of speakers.

Through the narratives of the new speakers, we see that language learning is not a straightforward journey from ignorance to fluency, but rather a complex, cyclical process that intertwines the past and present. The involvement of new speakers across these islands demonstrates that language revitalization can transcend geographic boundaries and reinforce the interconnectedness of language, culture, and community across the Ryukyu archipelago.

In reclaiming their ancestral language, the new speakers are not just acquiring new words and grammar; they are revisiting their childhood memories, reconnecting with their cultural heritage, and reinterpreting their relationships with their land and the surrounding ocean. As learning an "ancestral language" is different from "learning a new language," the ancestral language means more than a language, especially if it is an Indigenous language with a history of colonialism and assimilation.

Therefore, when learning an Indigenous language as a non-ancestral language, there is a critical need for cultural sensitivity for people who do not belong to the Indigenous communities. When working with Indigenous language communities, we can ask ourselves: Whose space is this? Why do you learn this language, which is not your own? Whose land are you on? Being accountable for the speakers, communities, people, land, and non-humans, we can enact a practice of "relational accountability" (Wilson & Wilson, 1998).

In the English language or in the Western culture, time is usually considered as a linear concept, Hau'Ofa (2008) suggests time is conceptually different in the Pacific region. The past is in front of us, the future is behind us (Šipka, 2021). Hau'Ofa (2008) explains,

> That the past is ahead, in front of us, is a conception of time that helps us retain our memories and be aware of its presence. What is behind us cannot be seen and is liable to be forgotten readily. What is ahead of us cannot be forgotten so readily or ignored, for it is in front of our minds' eyes, always reminding us of its presence. Since the past is alive in us, the dead are alive—we are our history (p. 67).

While connecting to their ancestors, the environment, and the land, new speakers create a new meaning for the future. In other words, they are going back to the future through language reclamation. Through language revitalization, the notion of "youth" in language reclamation is redefined, as new speakers rediscover their connections to their language and culture, which transcend linear age progression. By learning from Elders and engaging with their cultural history, these new speakers experience a kind of rebirth, becoming "youth" in the sense of reawakening a deeper sense of belonging and identity that had been dormant or forgotten. This reshaping of time offers a powerful lens for understanding the reclamation process, one that embraces the past as an ever-present force shaping the future.

Ultimately, the reclamation of endangered languages, such as Ryukyuan, is not only about linguistic revitalization but also about cultural revitalization and cultural reclamation leading to healing. The analysis of interviews and results shows that community Elders, ancestors, land, ocean, and place—indeed, the perspectives of, and learning with the "Older generation"—are important for these new speakers/"youth" in the Ryukyuan context, which is often overlooked in New Speaker literature. As new speakers re-establish their linguistic ties to their ancestors and their land and ocean, they also reconnect with the land, the ocean, and the environment that has sustained their communities for generations.

Land and ocean emerge as influential teachers, imparting traditional ecological knowledge that deepens the new speakers' connection to the world around them. The success of new speakers on Ishigaki, Okinawa, and Okinoerabu Islands offers a compelling model for other Indigenous language reclamation efforts. It demonstrates that language revitalization can serve as a bridge to cultural and spiritual healing, environmental stewardship, and intergenerational solidarity. As these new speakers continue their journey, they not only reclaim their language but also reaffirm the resilience of their communities, grounded in the shared wisdom of their Elders and the land that has always been home.

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