

DocLing from the Participant's Perspective

SHIMOJI, Michinori
Kyushu University

This short essay examines how DocLing has positively impacted the research career of the present author. It also gives a brief introduction to several documentation and revitalization projects in which the present author or former participants of DocLing are working in collaboration.

Keywords: DocLing, Language documentation, Language revitalization, Ryukyuan

1. Introduction
2. DocLing and Ryukyuan linguistics
3. Ryukyuan documentation/revitalization projects
4. Concluding remarks

1. Introduction

As a DocLing project participant, I have much to say about how DocLing has positively impacted my own research career. After reviewing DocLing and its impact on my research within the context of endangered language studies in Japan, I go on to mention several documentation and revitalization projects in which the present author or former participants of DocLing are working in collaboration. I have been working on the description of Ryukyuan for about ten years now. Ryukyuan is a group of endangered Japonic languages, spoken on a chain of islands called the Ryukyu archipelago. According to UNESCO's report on language endangerment (<http://www.unesco.org/languages-atlas/>), there are at least eight endangered languages in Japan: Ainu, Hachijō, and six Ryukyuan languages (Amami, Kunigami, Okinawa, Miyako, Yaeyama, and Yonaguni).

In 2008, I wrote a descriptive grammar of Irabu, a Southern Ryukyuan language, as a PhD thesis submitted to the Australian National University (Shimoji 2008, 2017). It was just after submitting the thesis that I first joined DocLing. At that time, I had some elementary knowledge of the emerging field of research called “documentary linguistics,” having read the foundational work by Himmelmann (1998), but that

was almost all the information I had about documentary linguistics, and it was only theoretical knowledge. As was usual for many field linguists in those days, I identified myself as a “descriptive linguist,” with my primary interest being in compiling comprehensive grammar, text material, and a dictionary of the subject language, and I did not have any actual experience, or even interest, in conducting fieldwork that was informed by the theory of documentary linguistics. I had the misconception that documentary linguistics is a mere subdivision of descriptive linguistics, or “over-engineered” descriptive linguistics.

The experience of studying a range of concepts pertaining to the theory of documentary linguistics in a week-long intensive workshop had a big impact on me. As a participant of DocLing, I learned how description and documentation differ in their goals, and how the knowledge of one field of research is essential for the practice of another. In Section 3, I will briefly mention my own documentation project, which is clearly based on what I learned in the DocLing workshop.

2. DocLing and Ryukyuan linguistics

Around the time of the first DocLing (2008), there was an emerging “movement” of Ryukyuan studies, where younger scholars started to work on individual Ryukyuan dialects in the context of language endangerment, aiming to describe each individual Ryukyuan dialect in its own right. This new approach was distinct from the traditional Ryukyuan study, which tended to view Ryukyuan merely as useful dialectal data for the description of synchronic variation, or for the historical reconstruction of the Japonic family.

The departure from the traditional dialectological approach was quite independent of DocLing, but it was DocLing that introduced the important concept of documentation, which should not be confused with description, into the new approach of Ryukyuan studies. As a researcher involved in the emergence of Ryukyuan studies, I was aware that our new approach was more description-oriented. That is, our concern was primarily to describe each individual Ryukyuan dialect in the form of descriptive grammar (Shimoji 2008, Pellard 2009, Hayashi 2013, Niinaga 2014, etc.). Further, we did not have a clear picture of how the languages we were working on should be documented, and how the data should be managed in such a way that the data collected can be accessible for the wider community of researchers and for the local people. We also wanted to make our data usable for language revitalization if the local community wants such data.

Today, we are looking at a well-balanced research trend in which both description and documentation are emphasized. As will be shown in the following section, there are a number of research projects that focus on the documentation and revitalization of Ryukyuan languages.

3. Ryukyuan documentation/revitalization projects

The last ten years have seen the emergence of a number of documentation and revitalization projects by Ryukyuan researchers. They are not necessarily led by former participants of DocLing, but most projects similar to the ones I introduce in this section are in collaboration with the former participants of DocLing. In what follows, I briefly give an overview of three such projects, two of which aim at revitalization, and one of which aims at documentation.

3.1. Devising an orthography

The project called “A unified writing system for the Ryukyuan languages” is a collaborative project granted by the Toyota Foundation. The project is led by Dr. Shinji Ogawa (Kumamoto Prefectural University), with twelve collaborative researchers. The project aims to establish an orthographic system for Ryukyuan languages. The outcome has been published as a book (Ogawa (ed.) 2015), and the syllabary (i.e., the full list of symbols used for the orthographic system), with the sound(s) represented by each symbol, is listed on the project's website (<http://www.ryukyuan-writing.net/>).

When we think about language revitalization in Japan, we must take into account the fact that the local people are all bilingual with Japanese as one of the languages, and that Japanese has its own writing system, the *kana* system, which gives one letter for each syllable/mora (e.g., あ for /a/ and か for /ka/). All Ryukyuan researchers agree that the local people find it easier to use the *kana* system, than learning to use an IPA-based alphabetic system uniquely devised for the language they speak. The problem is that the syllable structure and phoneme inventory of a given Ryukyuan language are often far more complex than those of Japanese, and the existing *kana* system devised for Japanese cannot fully represent the sound system of Ryukyuan. For example, Irabu Ryukyuan has a number of syllabic consonants that begin in /b/, like /bz/ [b̥z̥] and /br/ [br̥], in addition to regular syllables that begin in /b/, like /ba/, /bi/, and /bu/. The *kana* system provides characters for the latter only, ば /ba/, び /bi/, and ぶ /bu/.

Thus, if we use the Japanese *kana* system for Ryukyuan languages, we need to devise a strategy to cover the syllables that cannot be represented by the existing *kana* system. In addition, it is useful if such a modified *kana* system is applicable to *all* local varieties of Ryukyuan, so that any local community of Ryukyuan may use the system when they want to create a textbook or some other written material for their revitalization efforts. The problem here is that the dialectal difference in Ryukyuan is striking, making it difficult to provide a unified, cross-dialectal *kana* system applicable for all Ryukyuan languages and their sub-dialects. The project solves this problem by providing a large but consistent set of auxiliary symbols in addition to the regular *kana* syllabary for Japanese, whereby we can write in *kana*, with additional symbols where necessary. In the Irabu orthography, for example, the syllables /bz/ and /bl/ are written with the

regular characters 𐄂 plus the small symbols 𐄃 and 𐄄 respectively, as in 𐄂𐄃 𐄄 for /bz/ and 𐄂𐄄 𐄃 for /br/, where the small symbols represent syllabic consonants. The use of small symbols to represent syllabic consonants is consistent for all other Ryukyuan dialects.

The project is a key to achieve active involvement of the local community, which is essential in language revitalization. The orthography enables education in a minority language, which would otherwise be impossible. It also encourages local writers and poets to publish their works in their own language. In this way, the language revitalization process gains sustainability, another important feature of a successful revitalization project.

3.2. Port language revitalization

The orthography project noted above has significant consequences for the revitalization of Ryukyuan languages, since it is now possible for subsequent revitalization projects to concentrate on content (i.e., products and outcomes such as textbooks, etc.) by utilizing the orthographic system for their target languages.

Dr. Masahiro Yamada (National Institute for Japanese Language and Linguistics) provides an excellent example of a language revitalization project using the orthographic system. In pursuit of revitalizing Yoron, Okinoerabu, and Yonaguni, all of which are in an imminent danger of extinction, Yamada is working in collaboration with linguistic researchers, designers, and the local community. His project is called *Port Language Revitalization* (<http://plrminato.wixsite.com/webminato>). The concept here is to provide a platform for content-based language revitalization. That is, his project serves as a platform (or “port” in his metaphor) where various kinds of content (e.g., fun books, storybooks, etc.) are created for the local community to utilize for language revitalization activities. Five Ryukyuan researchers, one specialist in the science of design, four designers, one photographer, and one illustrator are involved in this project, and more than ten content items have been created and made available for use.

3.3. The interdisciplinary dictionary project of Irabu

I am currently working on a documentation project that aims to document the lexicon of Irabu Ryukyuan with the help of specialists of different research disciplines¹. The interdisciplinary project team consists of a linguist (i.e., myself), a geographer, and a biologist. In this project, the local flora-fauna terms and place names are collected and documented in the form of a dictionary. The lexical knowledge of these semantic fields is much more effectively documented by collaborating with specialists of geography and of biology, than by a single linguist like me. In addition, the dictionary so compiled will be usable for the wider research community of biologists, geographers, as well as

¹ The project is supported by QR Program of Kyushu University (2016 to current)

linguists and anthropologists. Even though the project has a fixed term of two years, I will continue the project by getting another grant after the current term has terminated, so that different semantic fields can be added to the existing lexicon (i.e., flora-fauna terms and place names) with the help of a new documentation team consisting of different specialists.

4. Concluding remarks

DocLing has provided a firm basis on which Ryukyuan researchers can have a basic knowledge of documentary linguistics and its theory, methodology, and technology in an effective way. Thanks to DocLing, it is now common for a field linguist who works on Ryukyuan to pay fair attention to language documentation and revitalization. Being a free workshop that takes place in Japan, DocLing has allowed a number of young scholars and students based in Japanese institutions, especially those who work on Ryukyuan, to gain the basic knowledge of language documentation at a surprisingly low cost. When I joined DocLing, the majority of participants were postgraduate students and post-docs, and they all agreed that they would not have been able to attend such a workshop, if it had taken place overseas and/or with a high registration fee. The positive result, or “investment effect,” of the free workshop is obvious. A number of documentation and revitalization projects are in progress as we noted in Section 3.

References

- Hayashi, Yuka. 2013. “Minami Ryukyu Miyakogo Ikema hogen no bunpo [A grammar of the Ikema dialect of Miyako, of Southern Ryukyuan]”. Unpublished PhD thesis, Kyoto University.
- Himmelman, Nikolaus P. 1998. “Documentary and descriptive linguistics”. *Linguistics* 36. pp.161–195.
- Niinaga, Yuto. 2014. “A grammar of Yuwan, a Northern Ryukyuan language”. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Tokyo.
- Ogawa, Shinji. ed. 2015. *Ryukyu no Kotoba no Kakikata [How to Write Ryukyuan Languages]*. Tokyo: Kurosio Shuppan.
- Pellard, Thomas. 2009. “Ogami: Éléments de description d’un parler du sud des Ryukyus”. PhD thesis, École des hautes études en sciences sociales, Paris, France.
- Shimoji, Michinori. 2008. “A grammar of Irabu, a Southern Ryukyuan language”. Unpublished PhD thesis, Australian National University.
- . 2017. *A Grammar of Irabu, a Southern Ryukyuan Language*. Fukuoka: Kyushu University Press.