

16 **Learning Ainu: Perspectives and Attitudes**

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16.1 Introduction

After the establishment of the Matsumae Han in Ezo (today's Hokkaidō) in 1604, the Ainu people was subjected to progressive prevarication and oppression by the Japanese. Oppression from the government, social inequity, and the political manipulation of the Ainu identity throughout the following three centuries resulted in permanent damages to Ainu culture. One aspect of the cultural heritage that was particularly affected is language.

Since the foundation of the Matsumae Han and the beginning of Japanese interactions with the Ainu, primarily aimed at establishing business relations, it was necessary to have interpreters to communicate. However, while understanding of the Ainu language was deemed essential for Japanese interpreters, the Ainu were forbidden from learning Japanese to any extent. The Matsumae Clan was in fact afraid that, had the Ainu learnt Japanese, they could have informed the central Tokugawa government of the atrocities that were being committed in Ezo and was therefore interested in maintaining the language barrier (Fukazawa 2019, 7). Establishing such language barrier between the Ainu and the Japanese eventually helped bring the Japanese language to the status of prestige language with respect to Ainu, making this latter the weak language within that newly formed bilingual environment. Therefore, it can be seen how a

decline process for the Ainu language was set up right at the start of Ainu-Japanese relations. With time, using the Ainu language was initially discouraged and eventually completely forbidden, at first as a vernacular language to be used in public then more thoroughly even within Ainu communities. The imposition to not speak the Ainu language, kindled by the continuous prejudice that the Ainu people had to face, made Ainu speakers give up their language almost entirely to the point where in many cases it was not passed on to new generations any longer as elders feared negative repercussion on their children and families. This process of language denial was by and large completed by the end of 1920, but some Ainu continued to learn the language in the family, reaching even high levels of proficiency.

16.2 Counting Ainu and Ainu Speakers

This brief introduction to the history of Ainu language in modern times serves to highlight a number of issues that are central when considering the vitality of the language in today's Japan and the efforts towards the revitalisation of Ainu. First, there is the question of how many Ainu are there in contemporary Japan. As Okazaki (2019, 355) points out, the answer to this question is not an easy one and estimates of the number of Ainu vary sharply. Among the reasons for variations in counting Ainu people there is the fact that the polls and censuses carried out to date differ in their scope (for instance, Ainu residing outside of Hokkaidō are never or rarely included). However, one main factor that influences the counting and that easily results in a biased perception of the extension of the Ainu community is that many Ainu people still do not feel comfortable with showing their Ainu identity and therefore do not participate in polls and censuses (Kitahara 2011). As it regards language specifically, there is one more layer of difficulty when it comes to counting speakers of Ainu. Although most native speakers of Ainu have passed away and there are now very few people who acquired the language in the family, there still is a significant number of younger Ainu who can use the language at varying levels of proficiency. This means that the actual number of speakers present in Japan is far more than the alarming figure (5 people) released by UNESCO in 2009. This reality calls for a distinction between 'native' speakers (i.e. those who have learnt the language from a relative and used it as one of their first languages) and 'active' speakers (i.e. those who have a passive and/or active understanding of the language they have learnt as a second language later in their life and can use it to different extents), which is an aspect of language vitality most important for revitalisation (Okuda 2010).

16.3 What is There to Revitalise?

When it comes to revitalisation there are contrasting opinions even within the Ainu community. Among those who wish for the Ainu culture to be revitalised the majority (53.1%) believes that language is the most important aspect of the Ainu heritage to be preserved for the future. Nevertheless, Ainu ceremonies and dances were also named as cultural heritage that should be given priority. Furthermore, when asked about their Ainu language proficiency and about whether they would consider taking Ainu language lessons, only the 7.2% has said to be able to speak either well or sufficiently well to have a simple conversation and, even more importantly, only the 9.7% showed an interest in learning the language (Fukazawa 2019, 20).

The marginal interest in the Ainu language as a valuable part of the Ainu cultural heritage that could find its place in modern Japanese society has a lot to do with the general public's perspective towards it. As Sawai (1998) notes, the firm conviction that Japan is a monolingual nation and that Ainu is a minority language with not many speakers left has propagated the idea of Ainu as a dying language, too small and with too little space (or no space at all) in contemporary Japan for anyone to spend time for its revitalisation. That is, continuously portraying Ainu as a moribund language through the years has turned into a factual reality and has slowly convinced many members of the Ainu community that any revitalisation effort would be made in vain.

16.4 The Steps of Language Revitalisation

The following excerpts are taken from Kitahara (2012), a paper where the author, as a member of the Ainu community, touches upon a number of issues to be addressed when thinking of revitalising the Ainu language and provides his point of view. Starting from Kitahara's considerations discuss each of the following points.

1. Which 'Ainu language' should be revitalised? Though the Saru dialect of Southern Hokkaidō is often tacitly taken as some kind of standard language, Ainu has no real standard variety (Fukazawa 2019, 15-16) and dialectal differences can be striking especially between the Hokkaidō and Sakhalin varieties. Moreover, Ainu has never developed the vocabulary to express concepts and denote things that exist in contemporary society.

Chiba daigaku un Nakagawa Hiroshi nispa yeehe ene an hi. "Kotan pismo itah katu sinnay ciki, nah wa an kotan un itah neyahka okore nuu easkay pahno wantehci anah pirikahaa. Siisam neyahka, Tokyo kotan un kuru, Osaka un itah kii eaykah yahka, nuu easkay tah nee. Taaha neeno an anah pirika nanko" nah yee. Tani neanpe tah yeeruy pirika anpe nee kuni anramu. (p. 279)

As Nakagawa Hiroshi from Chiba University says: "[Considering] there are dialectal differences, it is good that people learn [the language] enough to understand the variety of whatever village. Even in Japan, a person from Tokyo indeed understands the [Japanese] dialect of Osaka, even if they do not know it. It would be good if [we could] reach this goal". As of today, I believe this would be the best thing.

Husko ohta isam ike tani aneywanke asiri itah temana anyee kun pe hetaneyya. Siisam utah neanpe sianno wooyaan huuresiisam itah nuhci ike siisam itah ne karahci anpe. Nee wahkayki aynu utah neanpe yeyekota an itah kii ruuhe ka isam kusu, siisam neeno asiriitah kara ka hankii. Nee kusu tane aynu itah wante utah an teh itah kii kusu nah eramuokay yahka, husko itah pateh nee anah, anpene itah hayta anpe. Nee teh itah ankara rusuy koroka, itahkara neanpe sianno itah wante utah nee anah easkay koroka, tani sonno hokampa. (p. 286)

How is one to express the new words that once did not exist but that are now used? The Japanese heard a lot of words from the Europeans and translated them into their language. However, the Ainu [who] did not even use their mother tongue [could] not create new words like the Japanese. For this reason, even if people now know Ainu and intend to use it, they really lack the terminology [to express themselves] if [they rely] only on the words that already exist. [People have] the will to make up [new] words, but creating neologisms [would] be possible if there were someone who really knew the language, so this is very difficult now.

2. What language materials (if any) should be used? How should they be structured?

Etutaani kotan omoto koro pe nee kusu, yaykotan un itah aneacaasnokara rusuy wakayki, nupurukampi neanpe Saru kotan un itah neewa Chitose kotan un itah pateh koro. Itakirenkakampi neyke, Horobetsu un itah naa koro wakayki, taa itah ahkari an itah neanpe itahhunta ponno ponno pateh anihii nee. Nee kusu asinno aneacaasnokara ohta, Hattori Shirō kara “ainugo hōgen jiten” (1964) [...] ohta an yaykotan un itah hunara ike PC onne ahunkehci ike imerukorocinunkekampi karahci. Taa pateh neyke, itah hayta kusu, tutanno, wooyaan husko oruspe annuu ike PC onne anahunke ike, opokinno itah anweekaarirehci. (pp. 280-1)

[The attendants to the courses] were people native of different parts of Hokkaidō, so they wished to learn the dialect of their village, but we had only dictionaries of the Saru and Chitose dialects. As for grammars, there was also one for the Horobetsu dialect but the amount of vocabulary was in fact smaller than that [available] for the other dialects. Therefore, while being taught from the beginning, [the students] looked for the words from their dialect in “A dialect dictionary of Ainu” by Hattori Shirō [...], entered them in a computer and created a database. Only by doing this [some] words were [still] missing, so then many old stories were listened to, [words] were included in the PC [database], and [new] terms were added little by little.

3. What should be the aim of language revitalisation? How should it be possible to use the language after having learnt it?

Tah neanpe yeeruye paase ike yeeruye hokampa oruspe nee kuni anramu. Repunmosiri orun oruspe annuu wahkayki, ramma itah eacaasnokara easkay yahka, nee itah sahno ukoytah easkay pe nee kusu, kii kun pe isam manu. Nee teh itah wante yahka, okaketa neera ka monrayke ne kii ka eaykah anpe yeeruye wen sirihii nee. (p. 290)

I think this is a more important and more complex matter. Hearing of [analogous] cases from abroad, studying [a language] is always possible but there seems to be no chance to use it because it is in fact possible to communicate without that language. And even if one knows the language, the fact that it cannot be introduced after [one has learnt it] in the workplace seems even worse.

Nee teh, eh yahka, hoskino anyee pe ani, oya utara ohta yee ka hankii. Tah kusu aynuitah neanpe aynu utuhta pateh kii. Koroka, cise soyta aynu unukara hi anpene ponno pateh an. (p. 297)

So even if they join [Ainu language courses], as I said before, they do not tell it to other people and for this reason they use the Ainu language only among members of the community. But the chances of meeting [other] Ainu outside of the household remain slim.

4. When should one start learning Ainu? Is there a recommended age to ensure proper language acquisition?

Sianno haciko ohta neanpe henke ahci tura ekihi nee koroka, icaakasnocise ohta ahun ohta otuye. Nee teh yaytuymaaste ike, ramurenkayne sinenehpone neera an pe ka kii easkay pahno poro koh, aynu weekaari ohta oman kuru ka an koroka, pookoro koh poo eyaynuhte kusu suy otuye hemaka. Ene teh, neera an yahka eyaycaakasno kuru neanpe sianno yuhke ramu koro kuru nee ike, porosereke poo reske hemaka teh, monrayki hemaka teh eh. (p. 297)

[Children] come [to Ainu language courses] at a very young age with [their] grandparents, but when they enter school they drop out [of classes]. Then, once the situation changes and they become old enough to decide for themselves, there are also people who re-join Ainu meetings, but as soon as they have children, they look after them and end up leaving again. That is, a person who [commits to] learning [Ainu] despite [their obligations] is a person with a strong will and, when they are done raising [their] children, the majority of them retires and returns [to meetings and courses].