

How much visibility do endangered Japonic varieties have in Japan? – The example of Hachijō¹

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Hachijō is a small Japonic variety, traditionally spoken on a few islands of the Izu archipelago, roughly 300 km south of Tōkyō. Its position within the Japonic family is still a matter of debate (see, for instance, KUPCHIK, 2011:7, vs. PELLARD, 2018:2) and while it was, until recently, almost universally considered to be a dialect of Japanese, the current tendency among linguists is to rather treat Hachijō as a distinct Japonic language.

Due to the pervasion of the standard dialect from Tokyo, Hachijō can now be considered to be somewhere between ‘severely endangered’ and ‘critically endangered’ in its native territory. Thus, it was included in 2009 in UNESCO’s *Atlas of the World’s Languages in danger* (MOSELEY, 2009), alongside seven other languages of Japan (namely Ainu, and six of the Ryukyuan languages). In the local communities, this international recognition led to an increasing awareness, and several efforts toward the preservation or revitalisation of the language were intended in the last 14 years (cf, for instance, MOTEGI, 2013).

In this perspective, we can wonder what kind of image and visibility was given to Hachijō in the public space of the south Izu islands in the last few years, and what this image indicates about the perception of the language, both within the local communities, and within Japan as a whole.

The key concept for analysing how visible a language is and how it appears, is the notion of ‘linguistic landscape’, which quantifies the appearances of languages and dialects, and analyses both their symbolic and their informational functions on various displays, such as public or commercial signs and graffiti (LANDRY & BOURHIS 1997), but also, more generally, on commercial products, and especially on those targeted toward tourists (see, for instance, INOUE, 2000, 2011, 2012 & 2022), or even on food menus (LONG, 2012). Among the main purposes of this analysis lies the idea that the perceptions associated with those displays do not only reflect the local or national sociolinguistic conditions, but can in fact play a role in shaping the perception of minoritised languages among the local and national communities, thus further influencing the language’s vitality as a whole (GORTER, MARTEN & VAN MENDEL 2012).

Thus, this presentation will question where, how, why and by whom Hachijō is portrayed in the linguistic landscape of Hachijō-jima and Aogashima (Tokyo Metropolis, Japan), and what this indicates about the perception of the language, both within the local communities, and in Japan as a whole. To the best of my knowledge, such a study was never conducted about Hachijō. It will be based on photographic data and interviews collected during my fieldwork on those islands, in March-April and June 2023.

More specifically, a first introductory part will be dedicated to the problematic of linguistic landscapes in Japan, and to the situation of Hachijō within this framework.

A second part will be dedicated to a spatial and typological inventory of the dialect occurrences in the island’s public signs.

Finally, a third and final part will be dedicated to the recent ‘dialect branding’ or merchandising that seem to be emerging in the South Izu islands, and could be the first step toward building a form of ‘cultural ecotourism’ or ‘linguistic tourism’ in this territory (see LONG, 2004; 2011; 2012 for an analysis of similar phenomena on the neighbouring islands of Ogasawara).

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