

A Non-Japanese Conducting Fieldwork in a Non-Japanese Community in Japan: How I Got to the Bonin (Ogasawara) Islands

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Introduction

For five years, I have been conducting fieldwork on the multilingual, multiethnic and multicultural community of the Bonin Islands. I am working with the “Western” islanders of Ogasawara to help them record and retain their linguistic and cultural uniqueness. The islanders are in the exceptional position of being Japanese citizens with a non-Japanese heritage.

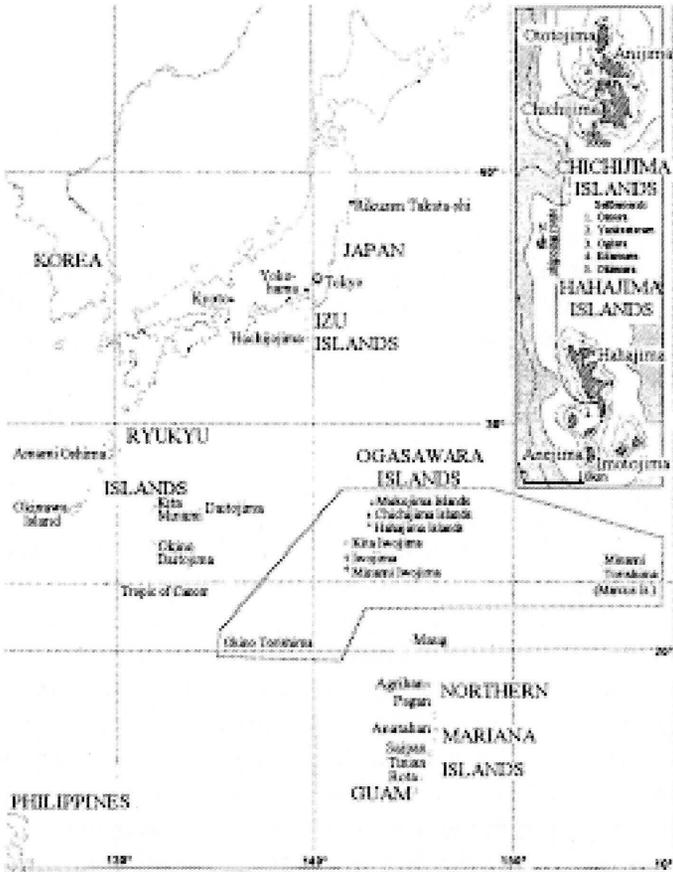
History

The Bonin Islands lay uninhabited until Pacific Islander women and European and American men from widely varying linguistic backgrounds settled there in the 1830s. A form of Pidgin English was their common language, and in the following decades creolization occurred as the children born and raised in this language environment acquired this as their native language. Almost a half century later, Japan claimed the islands and a huge influx of Japanese settlers ensued. In the face of increasing in-migration from Japan, the settlers developed a common identity based on their shared heritage, familial relatedness, use of English, and espousal of Christianity. They probably would have been assimilated into Japanese culture, but following World War II, the United States Navy took control of the islands, allowing only those islanders of non-Japanese ancestry (“Western” ancestry; in Japanese, *Ōbeikei*) to live there, conducting education in English, and thereby re-instilling in them a sense of non-Japaneseness. Since the reversion of the islands to Japan in 1968 and the heavy influx of

Daniel LONG

ethnic-Japanese, these islanders have once again found themselves in a minority status.

Figure: Location of the Bonin Islands



Linguistics Field Research on the Islands

I made my first research trip to the islands in the fall of 1997 and have just returned from my fourteenth trip. The purpose of my first trip was to

investigate stories I had heard that the islands, due to their long and somewhat extreme isolation, were home to an old form of New England U. S. English. I quickly realized, however, that in a situation like that found on the Bonins, language isolation and language contact were two sides of the same coin. In other words, when speakers of different languages or dialects form a closed community such as this, they are both isolated from the speech of outsiders and at (precisely) the same time in intense contact (Long 1998). Evidence indicates that a Contact Variety of English (Pidgin and, later, Creoloid) developed on the islands (Long 1999). Many other English-based pidgins and Creoles developed throughout the broad Pacific later in the nineteenth century, and share many common features because there was contact among their speakers. The Bonin variety of English, however, while influenced by the Pacific Island languages which were the mother tongues of many of the original settlers, seems to have developed largely in isolation from these (Long 2000). At the same time, twentieth-century Bonin English still maintained (and maintains) many characteristics of New England English (Trudgill et al. forthcoming; Long and Trudgill 2003). With the arrival of Japanese in the latter part of the nineteenth century, the linguistic situation on the island became even more complex, and the Ogasawaran Japanese itself seems to be a Koine (i.e., a mixture) formed from the various Japanese dialects that were brought in (Long ed. 2002). The original islanders learned Japanese in school and became bilingual (Long forthcoming a). In the early to mid twentieth century, the use of both Japanese and English by the islanders coalesced and crystallized in the form of the “Ogasawara Mixed Language,” which uses a basically Japanese sentence structure, but heavily loaded with English lexical items and even English grammatical elements in the form of English phrase structure (Long forthcoming b).

Maintenance of a Separate Identity

Socio-cultural factors are closely related to language usage anywhere, but they are especially interesting on the Bonins (Long 2004a). The formation of a unique and homogeneous identity is a pivotal factor in understanding the islands and the maintenance of this identity is tied

Daniel LONG

closely with the maintenance of the English language (Long 2004b). Moreover, there are island communities around the world with which we can compare and contrast the Bonins, and in doing so deepen our understanding of each of the communities (Long 2001)

The Westerners' sense of unique identity is due to several interrelated factors. (1) Historical - Their ancestors arrived before the Japanese in the early nineteenth century. (2) Genealogical - They have non-Asian physical characteristics and they can trace these back to their common ancestors. (3) Experiential - Not only did their ancestors have unique experiences, but they themselves have shared experiences, namely living under the U.S. Navy administration, but also some suffered racism from the Japanese during the Pacific War, many went to school in Guam, and so on. (4) Cultural - They know non-Japanese songs and dances, use unique fishing methods and canoes, practice Christianity and share some ceremonial icons such as floral funeral wreaths, have their own ways of cooking ("we don't put sugar in our turtle stew like the Japanese do"), and so on. (5) Linguistic - They share English and Hachijō-influenced Japanese. They retain Western family names and given names. The experiential factor may be the significant of these. Several ethnic Japanese men and women married Westerners and lived on the island throughout the Navy time. These people clearly do not share a common genealogy, and generally cannot speak English either, but they are considered Ōbeikei, by themselves, by other Ōbeikei, and by ethnic-Japanese as well.

Experiences Working with the Community

When I first began working with the Bonin Islanders, many (if not most) were embarrassed about the way they talk amongst themselves (a speech variety sometimes referred to as *shima kotoba*. Many islanders could not understand why I wanted to go to the trouble to study something they regarded as "bad" and "full of mistakes." This linguistic insecurity is quite common around the world in speech communities which don't happen to speak the language variety which others have declared "Standard." In the Bonins, reasons for linguistic insecurity include the following:

- *Non-use of honorifics or polite forms.* An islander recently told me of trouble she had at her workplace when she referred to her boss as *omae*. This, along with you, is the default second-person pronoun on the island and can be used towards anyone, but this difference from Standard Japanese obviously causes problems in interaction between islanders and non-islanders.
- *Use of non-standard Japanese forms.* The variety of Japanese found on the Bonins is a Koine, that is, a mixture of various mainland Japanese dialects. It is especially influenced by the Hachijō-jima dialect. Due to a strange historical twist of fate the Westerners of Ogasawara now retain more elements of the Hachijō dialect than their ethnic Japanese counterparts do. That historical situation goes like this. During the Meiji period, ethnic Japanese settlers from Hachijō-jima settled on the islands, sometimes intermarrying with the Westerners. To an extent the Japanese that the Westerners heard around them, and thus acquired, was the Hachijō dialect. After World War II, the descendants of these Hachijō settlers were not allowed back on the island (only the Westerners were). Living in mainland Japan for a quarter Century resulted in their losing the Hachijō dialect. Meanwhile, back on the Bonins, the Westerners were living in relative isolation from Japan, with a few dozen Navy men and their families. The Westerners used English when they interacted with the Navy or when they went to Guam where they attended high school. They used Japanese, either by itself or as an element of the Mixed Language, when spoke to each other, and this Japanese was (and still is) chocked full of Hachijō dialect words. Today the Hachijō-kei (descendants of Hachijō settlers) have returned to the islands, but it is an ironic twist of fate that if you want to hear the Hachijō dialect on Ogasawara today, it is the Westerners and not the Hachijō-kei to whom you must speak.
- *Language Mixing.* The Westerners mix Japanese and English when they speak, and this mixing itself is seen as a bad thing. During the Navy administration of the islands, they had been encouraged to speak “good English” and had been discouraged from mixing English and Japanese. After the reversion to Japan, they were encouraged to speak “good Japanese” and again discouraged from mixing the languages.

Technically, what the islanders are speaking should not be viewed as a mix of English and Japanese, but rather as a single, unified language system (a Mixed Language) which consists of elements from English and Japanese. We can draw this conclusion based on several facts. (1) Bonin Islanders born in the mid twentieth century will tell you that what they spoke in the home with their brothers and sisters was “Japanese and English mixed up.” In other words, the Mixed Language was their first language; their native tongue. They learned to speak Standard English and Standard Japanese after this, as their second and third languages acquired at school. Even today, some of these people tease each other that they still cannot speak proper English or proper Japanese, and it is true that some of the islanders who have never lived off-island are much less comfortable speaking English or Japanese than they are speaking the Mixed Language. (2) Moreover, the Ogasawara Mixed Language clearly has its own grammatical rules, just as Standard French or Kyoto-ben or Melanesian Pidgin English. There are ways that you can and cannot mix English and Japanese on Ogasawara. For example you can say “*Me-ra mugutta yo, about ten meter, de longusta shikkari totta do,*” but it would be strange (ungrammatical) to say something like “*We wa dive suru-ed juu meters and toru-ed a lot of ise-ebi yo.*” Even though both sentences mix Japanese words and grammatical elements, the former is perfectly normal (grammatical) example of the Bonin Islanders’ language, while the latter is simply weird and probably incomprehensible.

In the past year or two, however, I have begun to notice dramatic changes in the attitudes of the islanders towards the way they talk. I gave a lecture on the island a couple of years ago on the linguistic situation. In attendance were three Westerners of the Navy generation. During the lively question and answer period, one of these raised her hand and stood up. After kindly thanking me for a stimulating talk, she said, “*Me-ra wa jibun-ra no language ni motto pride wo motanakucha.*” The audience burst into applause and she into tears. Today, more than a few of the islanders greet me when I get off the boat waving snippets of paper on which they written unique island words they have remembered and jotted down just for me.

Advantages I May Have Had Over a Native Japanese Researcher

I am in a position to say things like, “Teach me some island names of plants and animals” because I as an outsider, do not know them. Being able to speak English is an advantage in working with the islanders. Many enjoy the opportunity to speak to me in English several times a year, because they feel their English has “gotten rusty” and this is their chance to bring it out and dust it off. Being an American (and not Japanese) is an advantage. I have taken bilingual Japanese people along on interviews with me, but many islanders feel odd speaking English with them and automatically switch into Japanese. Moreover, more than a few of the Westerners harbor unpleasant memories of the Japanese—how Japanese hurled racial slurs at them during the war; how Japanese journalists made news of their inability to read and write Japanese, or even to speak the Standard variety, etc. Thus while I would never do anything to stir up these feelings, I am in the position to provide a sympathetic ear for the islanders who want to have their stories told. At the same time, it must be pointed out that some islanders feel betrayed by the U.S. government who gave them almost no warning before abruptly turning them and their island back over to Japan in 1968.

Conclusions

The Bonin Islanders are people who live within Japanese society, but do not see themselves as completely belonging to it. After twenty years of living, studying, and working in Japan, I feel more at home here than I do in the United States. Yet I know that no matter how long I live in Japan, I will never feel “Japanese” (nor have I ever aspired to such a goal). In working with the Bonin Islanders, I have gained new insights into my own role as a foreign scholar working in Japan.

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