

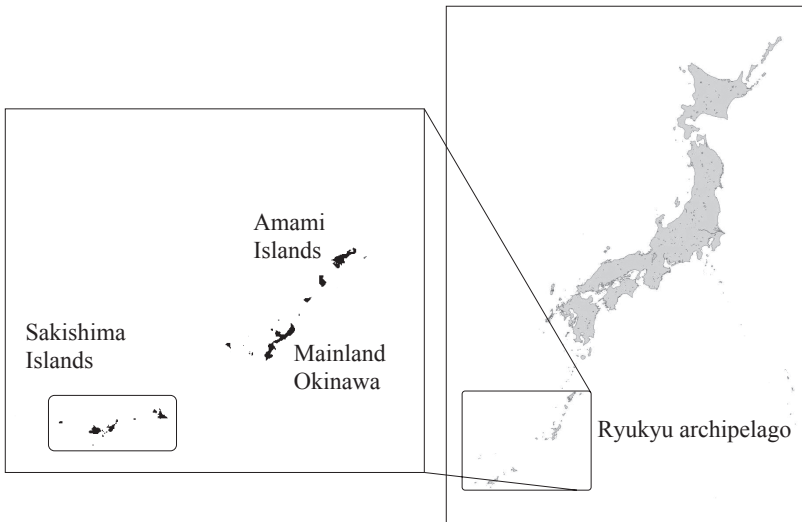
Chapter 1

The Irabu language and its speakers

This chapter introduces the language described in this grammar, Irabu Ryukyuan (henceforth Irabu). The chapter gives information about the genealogical and geographical affiliations of the language together with the settlement and political history of the Ryukus. This chapter also addresses the sociolinguistic situation, literature review, and a brief sketch of important features of phonology and grammar, with a particular focus on typological characteristics.

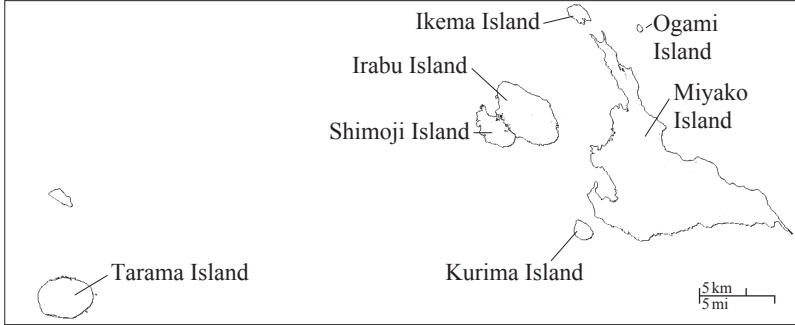
1.1. Geography

Irabu is spoken on Irabu, which is one of the Sakishima Islands within the Ryukyu archipelago, an island chain situated in the extreme south of the Japan archipelago.



MAP 1 The Ryukyu archipelago

The Sakishima Islands consist of two groups: the Miyako Islands and the Yaeyama Islands. Irabu is the second largest island in the Miyako Islands (MAP 2).



MAP 2 The location of Irabu within the Miyako Islands¹

Next to Irabu lies Shimoji, which has no permanent inhabitants and there is a very large airfield for training pilots and a small residential area of these pilots and associated people, surrounded by scattered fields of local people living in Irabu. However, this island used to be inhabited by Irabu people, and was called *macinaka* [matsinaka] ‘in-the-woods’. The previous importance of this island as a living place is evidenced in the fact that it is the setting of a lot of stories and legends (see Appendix (1)).

The distance between the Sakishima Islands and Mainland Okinawa is approximately 300 km, the greatest between any two adjacent islands in Japan. Moreover, this distance is the greatest between any two adjacent islands in the Western Pacific Rim (Kamchatka Peninsula through to Papua New Guinea, Uemura 1997: 319). As will be noted in the following section, this conspicuous geographic separation between the Sakishima Islands and Mainland Okinawa has significant consequences for the historical development of the languages of the Sakishima Islands.

1.2. Genealogy

Ryukyuan is a group of languages that forms a branch of the Japonic family, coordinate with Japanese.² Ryukyuan falls into two primary subgroups, Northern Ryukyuan and Southern Ryukyuan. These two subgroups in turn have a number of subdivisions. FIGURE 1–1 shows a genealogical classification of the Japonic family, where a detailed classification is made for the Miyako group based on Pellard (2009).

¹ The use of this map and MAPS 3 and 4 below is by courtesy of Dr. Thomas Pellard.

² The term ‘Japonic’ is employed in diachronic studies such as Erickson (2003) and Serafim (2003), though a more traditional term would be Japanese (Osada 2003: 10).

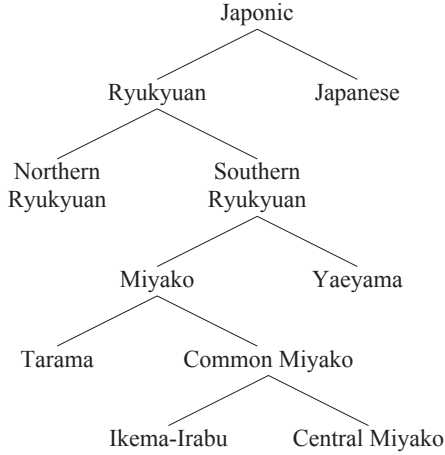


FIGURE 1–1. Genealogical classification of Ryukyuan (based on Pellard 2009)

Here I use the term ‘language’ to refer to the speech varieties listed in FIGURE 1–1, thus including Irabu, and ‘dialect’ to the subvarieties of each language. Dialectal variation in Irabu is discussed in §1.4.2.

Irabu belongs to the Miyako group, which first divides into Tarama and Common Miyako. Common Miyako then divides into the Ikema-Irabu subgroup and Central Miyako group (Pellard 2009). The Miyako group is defined by several lexical, phonological and morphological innovations that distinguish it from the other Southern Ryukyuan subgroups, e.g. the form of the limiter marker ‘also; too’ (*=mai* as opposed to *=n*; Pellard 2015: 19).

There is no mutual intelligibility between Japanese and Ryukyuan (Uemura 1997: 312). There is no mutual intelligibility between Northern and Southern Ryukyuan either (Uemura 1997: 313). Moreover, there is almost no mutual intelligibility between the Miyako group and the Yaeyama group of Southern Ryukyuan.

1.3. Notes on the settlement and political history of the Ryukyu Islands

Early Japonic speakers from Mainland Japan are believed to have come southward to the north parts of the Ryukyu archipelago (Amami and Mainland Okinawa) sometime between the 2nd and 6th centuries (Uemura 1997). After that, particularly after the 8th century, there was no massive socio-cultural contact between the Ryukyu Islands and Mainland Japan until the 17th