

Number of speakers of Central Okinawan

By Zachary Read (2011)

The total number of speakers worldwide and regionally is unknown. However, as the language is only natively spoken by those over the age of 70, and mostly understood and spoken by those over the age of 50, both of which represent approximately 10% and 20% of the total population of the Okinawa Prefecture respectively, an estimated figure can be extrapolated. The October 2011 population census gives the prefecture a total population of 1,401,933 people, with approximately 950,000 people living within the southern part of Okinawa Island, as well as the islands of Kerama, Kumejima, Tonaki and Aguni. Accordingly, it can be extrapolated that there are around 95,000 people if not less whose first tongue is Central Okinawan, and 190,000 people who may have it as their second tongue, for a generous total of 285,000 speakers. The city of Naha itself, with a population of 317,645, would count about 31,800 first-language speakers, and maybe 63,500 second-language speakers. The rate of comprehension and contact sharply declines in younger generations, with those in their 40s understanding only passively or minimally, and other generations having absolutely no understanding of the language other than a few key phrases and set expressions.

The 2010 edition of the UNESCO Interactive Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger considers the language to be “definitely endangered”, as children no longer learn the language at home. This should be re-evaluated to severely or critically endangered, since strong language policies that were enacted in the late 19th century up until the mid-20th century outright discouraged and banned the use of the language, an ideology which permeated into the regional culture with the language not having been passed down by the older generations and not having been taught in schools. This means that the language, despite being the most populous of the Ryukyuan varieties, will be on its way to extinction within the next 50 years, becoming nothing more than a cultural relic, unless immediate action is taken to document, revitalize and teach the language.

Bibliography

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