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Language Attitudes of Ainu People toward their Language, its Speakers, and Linguistic Institutions: Implications for Revitalization and Modern Use

（アイヌ語、その話者、および言語に関する制度に対するアイヌ民族の言語態度をめぐって：言語復興と現代的使用への示唆）

Background

Despite four decades of revitalization efforts, the Ainu language remains critically endangered with declining speaker numbers and low societal status. A key factor overlooked in revitalization planning is community language attitudes: the evaluative dispositions to language and its speakers that shape how people engage with the language and their willingness to learn it. This study provides the first comprehensive investigation of Ainu people's language attitudes, examining attitudes toward the Ainu language, its speakers, and language-related social institutions—including language learning—investigating how these attitudes shape engagement with language revitalization and modern language use.

This study examines Ainu collaborators' language attitudes and how these attitudes manifest in linguistic practices and engagement with revitalization and modern use of Ainu. Attitudes are studied in the field of social psychology and attitudes toward languages are studied in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology. The simplest definition of an attitude is that it is an evaluative reaction to an object, and accordingly, language attitudes are evaluative reactions to languages and their speakers (Dragojevic et al. 2021: 61). By applying a language attitudes approach to contemporary issues, which include language reclamation, modern use, and learning, the study describes the complexity of Ainu perspectives toward the language, its speakers, and language-related institutions. It shows how attitudes can be conflicted even within individuals. Based on these findings, attitudes toward language-related institutions, negotiations between preservation and modernization, and implications for revitalization policy are discussed. Throughout, the study centers Ainu voices, allowing community members to express their perspectives in their own words.

Language attitude research on minoritized and endangered languages has demonstrated the critical role of speaker attitudes in language maintenance and revitalization. Research on the language attitudes of the Ainu has not yet been conducted, and this study contributes to research by providing the first systematic empirical data on Ainu language attitudes collected directly through field research. Such research has long been theoretically desirable but difficult to implement due to social circumstances and privacy protection concerns, and the study therefore fills an empirical gap, offering evidence-based insights where previously only theoretical assumptions existed.

The scientific significance of this study is twofold. First, it offers unique insight into what the Ainu think about their language, its revitalization, and use in the modern world, contributing to the growing international knowledge base on minoritized Indigenous Peoples' views on language loss, reclamation, and use. Second, from a theoretical point of view, I maintain that when minorities' language attitudes toward their minoritized language are studied, it is not sufficient merely to consider stances toward the language itself and its speakers, but also toward institutions and events related to the language, such as language education, language policy and planning, academic research, and power dynamics. The research argues for expanding the language attitudes framework beyond languages and speakers to include institutional dimensions and events, which are crucial to understand minoritized language contexts. Expanding the target of language attitude research provides a wider sociolinguistic perspective that might help explain the well-attested gap between positive attitudes toward a language and actual linguistic behavior.

The central aim of the research is to identify Ainu collaborators' language attitudes toward the Ainu language, its speakers, learning Ainu, and other Ainu language-related institutions and how these are manifested in their practices regarding revitalization and modern use of the Ainu language. The main research questions are as follows:

1. What attitudes do Ainu collaborators hold toward the Ainu language, its speakers, and language learning, and how do these attitudes shape their language practices?
2. What attitudes do Ainu collaborators hold toward language-related social institutions, particularly regarding language revitalization and modernization, and how do these attitudes shape engagement with language practices?

Before turning to the research itself, it is important to address my positionality in this research. I am a Finnish researcher trained in linguistics at Hokkaido University, and I came to this research as an outsider to both the Ainu community and Japan. As a foreign researcher, I occupy a complex position: simultaneously an outsider with less stake in local politics, yet someone with institutional backing and the mobility to leave, unlike community members invested in long-term outcomes. I acknowledge my privilege of having access to academic and financial resources the local Ainu do not necessarily have. My interest in Ainu language revitalization stems from a long-standing passion for languages and from my undergraduate studies in Japanese sociology and politics at Hokkaido University, which naturally led me to sociolinguistics and language policy research. Having now lived in Biratori for two and a half years, I am here both as a researcher and a member of the community, and I am now part of the revitalization movement myself. I acknowledge my support for Ainu reclamation efforts and my biases, and I have tried to be especially careful challenging my own thinking on topics where I hold strong opinions. Throughout the research (excluding this summary), I provide extensive direct quotes from the interviews to demonstrate that my analysis is grounded in the collaborators' own words and perspectives rather than imposed interpretations.

Theoretical framework

Language attitudes are the central concept in this study. Contemporary definitions describe attitudes as a disposition to respond favorably or unfavorably to an object, person, institution, or event (Ajzen 2005: 3). Attitudes cannot be directly observed, as they are inner components of mental life, and thus they must be measured through responses to the object being evaluated (Oppenheim 1982). These responses can be expressed directly or indirectly and can include verbal statements, beliefs, thoughts, emotions, stereotypes, opinions, or selective recall. Understanding the sociolinguistic situation of a language community requires knowledge of the language attitudes of the community members, and when dealing with minoritized and endangered languages, language attitudes play a crucial role in the language practices of the community (Sallabank 2012; Garrett et al. 2003).

In the context of language attitudes, the object of evaluation is a language variety or a certain aspect of it or, as in the majority of research, its speakers (Dragojevic et al. 2021). Responses to the object can be divided into three components: feelings (e.g., positive and negative prejudices), beliefs (e.g., positive and negative stereotypes), and behavior (e.g., preference or discrimination) (Kircher and Zipp 2022). The cognitive component encompasses beliefs about a language and its societal significance, the affective component reflects emotional responses such as liking or disliking the language, and the behavioral component involves actions related to language use. As with attitudes in general, language attitudes are not overt, and they can be ambivalent, with dissonance between emotions, beliefs, and behavior. Beliefs about speakers have two principal evaluative dimensions: status, which concerns the utilitarian value and social mobility associated with the language, and solidarity, which concerns ingroup loyalty and feelings of attachment and belonging to the group (Woolard 1989; Baker 1992; Kircher and Zipp 2022).

In this study, language attitudes are understood, as an adaptation of Ajzen (2005: 3), as “a disposition to respond favorably or unfavorably to a language variety, speakers, linguistic institution, or language-related event.” While language attitude research has mainly focused on evaluative beliefs about speakers and their status and solidarity (e.g., Dragojevic et al. 2021), this study aims to examine all three dimensions—emotions, beliefs, and behavior—whenever the data permit. Beliefs about Ainu speakers and their evaluative dimensions of status and

solidarity were frequently attested in the data, but the discussion is not restricted to those two. The collaborators also discuss their experiences with language learning methods and past learning experiences, which seem to significantly guide their dispositions toward the Ainu language and its revitalization, and several collaborators discuss their motivation, or lack thereof, to learn Ainu. Furthermore, the collaborators discuss topics related to linguistic institutions—understood here as enduring social arrangements that organize and structure human behavior within specific domains of social life—such as standardization, researchers/linguists, and hierarchies between language learners and teachers. The approach taken in the present study is thus wider in scope than what the majority of the preceding research has adopted, encompassing attitudes toward language, its speakers, learning the language, and institutions related to the language. While the approach is informed by existing theory, it is driven by the themes emerging from the research data, drawing on grounded theory and inductive theory building.

Language policy and planning (LPP) comprises strategies, positions, and guiding principles aimed at modifying the position of a specific language in society. This can involve addressing concerns related to language acquisition, structure, or usage and implementing deliberate measures to bring about these changes (Sallabank 2012; Spolsky 2021). LPP plays a significant role in influencing language choice and can shape language use across different aspects of society, such as government, education, employment settings, religious institutions, households, and individual language users. The concrete actions or the planning part of LPP are usually divided into four planning types: status planning, prestige planning, acquisition planning, and corpus planning (Hornberger 2006; Sallabank 2012). Knowledge of the language attitudes of the target group for a certain language policy plays a central role in implementing successful language policy, as attitudes influence the willingness to engage with and adopt language policies, such as language revitalization (Sallabank 2012).

Language reclamation and revitalization form a part of LPP aimed at reversing language shift. Language revitalization is often used as an umbrella term to cover all kinds of activities that aim to increase the use of an endangered or dead/dormant language (Hinton et al. 2018). In language revitalization, the language use domains of an endangered language or a minority language are expanded to domains in which it was earlier used or new domains that are now occupied by another, usually a mainstream language (Fishman 2001; Hinton et al. 2018; Sallabank 2012). Language reclamation, on the other hand, encompasses even wider efforts than just the linguistic rights claims that language revitalization promotes and is rather a form of decolonization. It is defined as a “larger effort by a community to claim its right to speak a language and to set associated goals in response to community needs and perspectives” (Leonard 2012, cited in Leonard 2017: 19). While revitalization in a narrow sense primarily considers increasing the number of speakers, reclamation also concerns the circumstances and wishes of the speakers themselves. For this reason, minority communities and language activists have started to adopt the term reclamation rather than revitalization (Leonard 2017; Hinton et al. 2018). In this study, the efforts of the Ainu to take the language of their ancestors back into use will generally be referred to as language reclamation, while non-community-led activities are referred to as language revitalization.

Language modernization forms a crucial component of corpus planning, which is one of the four types of LPP. Language modernization—sometimes used synonymously with the term language adaptation—is defined by Bowerman (2006: 315) as “linguistic change, whether deliberate or spontaneous, whose goal is to adapt a language to the changed or changing needs of its speech community.” Using a language in contemporary contexts necessarily requires linguistic adaptation to address new societal functions and needs (Hinton et al. 2018). Modernization deals with making a language usable in modern language use domains, including creating new words for modern concepts and phenomena that do not yet exist in the language. In the case of Ainu, linguistic modernization particularly involves developing new vocabulary through borrowing and/or word-formation processes, as well as potentially addressing standardization and orthography development to enable expanded use in contemporary domains such as education and technology.

Methodology and research material

This qualitative language attitudes study is based on data from semi-structured interviews with 15 Ainu collaborators conducted in Biratori town between March 2024 and January 2025. The approach taken to the analysis is that of sociolinguistics, but since the study concerns a minoritized people and their language, a critical perspective on power relations and ideologies is also applied. Both emic and etic stances are taken: the analysis

explores how the collaborators themselves conceptualize and articulate their attitudes, while the analytical framework comes from language attitudes literature. The themes emerging from the data have been used to expand the theoretical framework by including language-related institutions as part of the analysis. The number of collaborators is relatively low ($n=15$), and accordingly the analysis is fundamentally conducted at the individual level, but shared orientations and group dynamics at the collective level are also scrutinized.

The primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews, with additional secondary data gathered through ethnographic fieldwork. Semi-structured interviews are well-suited to exploratory research of this nature, as they allow non-predetermined topics to emerge while also enabling the researcher to ask theory-informed questions (Galletta 2013). A potential limitation of interview-based language attitude research is social desirability bias (Garrett et al. 2003; Karatsareas 2022). To address this, a constructionist approach is adopted: rather than attempting to access what collaborators ‘actually’ feel, believe, or do, the focus is on what they say they feel, believe, or do (Edley and Litosseliti 2010: 173). From this perspective, the multidimensional context of the interview is understood to inevitably shape participants’ responses (Karatsareas 2022). The interview data are augmented by ethnography to provide a more complete picture of the actual linguistic behavior of local Ainu.

The questions asked during the interviews cover three topics: 1) learning and using the Ainu language, 2) the future use of Ainu, and 3) the modernization of Ainu. Additional questions were asked based on each collaborator’s answers. Two of the eldest collaborators indicated that the questions in topics 2 and 3 were too difficult for them to discuss, so these two interviews were conducted as unstructured interviews after topic 1, exploring their childhood and youth memories and other life experiences. The interviews were conducted in Japanese. Each interview was recorded, transcribed with the DeepGram speech-to-text API, and translated into English. After machine transcription, I listened to the recordings, making necessary corrections and additions, and parts not properly converted were manually transcribed. I translated the interviews into English, aiming to be as faithful as possible to the original utterances to preserve the authenticity of the collaborators’ voices.

The data are analyzed using thematic content analysis, a systematic yet interpretive method in which recurring themes are identified through iterative coding, grouping codes into categories, and allowing themes to emerge from these categories (Schreier 2012; Krippendorff 2019). The coding was conducted in several iterations: a rough initial coding was done during the transcription and translation phases, after which the relevant citations were compiled and assigned to codes, categories, and finally themes across four iterations of refinement. In addition, a second analysis with predetermined codes was conducted, in which the data were categorized by the dimensions of attitudes—affect, cognition, and behavior—and further by whether they concern the Ainu language itself, Ainu speakers, learning Ainu, or other Ainu language-related institutions. The purpose of combining these two analyses is to ensure comprehensive coverage of language attitudes by integrating bottom-up identification of themes significant to collaborators with top-down systematic categorization according to established theoretical frameworks. Thematic content analysis can be criticized for subjectivity, and this is usually mitigated by double-coding, but in this case double-coding was not possible due to the strict requirements of protecting the anonymity of the collaborators. Instead, direct quotes from the interview data are included extensively in the dissertation to support interpretations and make the analytical process transparent.

The thematic analysis yielded seven main themes. The first theme concerns identity, including the tension between ideal identity and the reality of linguistic ability, as well as the personal significance of the Ainu language. The second theme addresses the role of the Ainu language in today’s world, covering topics from traditional and ceremonial use to contemporary life, tourism, commodification, and treatment by companies and the government. The third theme is the perceived utility of Ainu, with collaborators noting the lack of speakers and places to use the language, its low economic value, and the fact that everyone can speak Japanese. The fourth theme deals with language revitalization and maintenance, including questions about who should be responsible for revitalization, what the goals should be, and whether maintaining the language is sufficient. The fifth theme concerns language learning, encompassing self-perception as a learner, fear of making mistakes, teaching and learning methods, and the question of non-Ainu learning the language. The sixth theme is linguistic purism and protectionism, where collaborators express both openness to modernization and concern about maintaining authenticity. The seventh theme addresses decision-making power and ownership of the language, including the lack of Ainu leadership in revitalization, the question of who decides what is “correct” language, and the privileging of documentation over lived transmission.

Discussion

The discussion follows a two-part structure: first, collaborators' language attitudes toward the Ainu language, its speakers, and language learning across emotional, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions are discussed, and second, attitudes toward language-related institutions—including language policy, standardization, modernization, academic authority, and power relationships between students/laypeople and teachers/researchers—are examined. The findings reveal predominantly positive emotions toward the Ainu language alongside complex beliefs about its limited practical value and concerns about authenticity. A notable gap exists between positive attitudes and actual learning behaviors, with practical constraints often overriding cultural motivations. Collaborators also express strong opposition to standardization rooted in desires to preserve dialectal diversity, more ambivalent attitudes toward lexical modernization, and frustration about losing agency in language-related decision-making. However, this frustration translates not into rejection of outside involvement but into calls for collaborative approaches that center Ainu self-determination.

The affective attitudes toward Ainu are far more nuanced than simple positive/negative categories. The coexistence of pride, protectiveness, and anxiety reflects linguistic ambivalence, where collaborators simultaneously celebrate and feel burdened by their linguistic inheritance. Accounts about regret and loss point to how language shift creates intergenerational emotional trauma. The tension between wanting to speak Ainu authentically while learning it in an environment where some original language forms have been lost creates an authenticity paradox: collaborators feel emotionally connected to the language but are frustrated by the perceived impossibility of learning it exactly as their elders spoke it. For some, Ainu carries sacred weight, as incorrect usage in spiritual contexts is feared to be disrespectful to the *kamuy* 'spiritual beings', which may actually inhibit learning rather than encourage it. These emotional patterns align with the understanding that successful language reclamation needs to address not just linguistic competence but also the complex emotional relationships people have with their ancestral language.

Beliefs about the Ainu language reveal a fundamental paradox where the language is simultaneously valued as culturally essential yet dismissed as practically useless. This utilitarian versus symbolic value conflict reflects broader tensions in minoritized language contexts between status and solidarity. The perceived lack of prestige creates circular reasoning: Ainu lacks prestige because it is not used, but it cannot be used because it lacks speakers, and it lacks speakers because it has no prestige. Additionally, some collaborators treat their ancestral language as a cultural artifact rather than a living communication system, and a cognitive focus on pronunciation and correct use creates perfectionist frameworks that may actually inhibit learning by creating performance anxiety and fear of making mistakes. These cognitive patterns suggest that successful revitalization may require not just language teaching but also explicit work to reshape the mental frameworks through which people understand their ancestral language.

Behavioral patterns demonstrate a gap between emotions/beliefs and actions. The historical pattern of protective non-transmission by previous generations, which was not passive neglect but active behavioral choices motivated by love and pragmatism in the face of structural oppression, has evolved into contemporary performative advocacy, where collaborators express support for the language while avoiding personal learning commitments. One of the main reported reasons not to learn Ainu is lack of time, but also loss of interest and not wanting to learn inauthentic Ainu are mentioned. However, many collaborators unconsciously use more Ainu vocabulary than they acknowledge, suggesting that identity-based language behaviors may be more robust than conscious assessments indicate and that existing behavioral foundations could be built upon in revitalization efforts. Three collaborators report prioritizing English learning over Ainu due to economic utility, demonstrating how behavioral language attitudes are shaped by market forces.

Attitudes toward language learning reveal a complex interplay between self-perceptions as learners and beliefs about how languages should be acquired. Self-doubt emerges as a barrier and it is compounded by a broader cultural narrative among Ainu people about the Ainu being "bad at studying." Perfectionist tendencies further inhibit learning, as some collaborators set impossibly high standards or avoid making mistakes entirely. However, learner identity proves malleable: several collaborators demonstrate transformations from language avoiders to active learners, suggesting that negative self-perceptions can be overcome with appropriate methods and

supportive environments. Those exposed to communicative methods such as *te ataarangi* often develop more positive attitudes toward mistakes and oral communication. Motivational factors encompass instrumental, integrative, and continuity motivations, plus personal enjoyment and intellectual fulfillment, but practical impediments frequently override even strong motivational factors.

Regarding who should learn and use Ainu, collaborators express predominantly inclusive attitudes, welcoming anyone interested in the language while recognizing the practical necessity of broad participation. Many mention children as a priority group for language transmission, though this creates dilemmas when adults themselves have not learned the language. The visions for future language use span both traditional domains and contemporary contexts, but collaborators distinguish between meaningful incorporation of Ainu and superficial tokenistic use. Their support for visibility in linguistic landscapes and commercial contexts is conditional: such use must be respectful and avoid exploitation. A methodological finding also emerges: when asked detailed questions about possible applications, some collaborators who initially viewed Ainu as having limited use identified numerous potential contemporary functions during the conversation itself, suggesting that explicit discussion may help counter beliefs about the language's practical uselessness.

Standardization emerges as one of the most controversial aspects of modernization, with the majority of collaborators opposing the creation of a standard variety. Opposition stems primarily from concerns about dialectal preservation and the centrality of ancestral connection as a learning motivation. Collaborators fear that standardization would sever the very connections to ancestors that motivate language learning, and they argue that it primarily serves external needs rather than community priorities. The preference for maintaining dialectal diversity reflects a polynomic approach that accepts multiple varieties without hierarchy. Regarding neologism development, collaborators demonstrate more openness, with most recognizing the necessity of expanding vocabulary for contemporary life. However, views diverge on process: some advocate for deliberate coining using Ainu morphemes, while others prefer organic emergence by first borrowing Japanese words and then letting the neologisms develop through natural speaker interaction. Regardless of position, collaborators consistently prioritize community acceptance over institutional prescription. Central to authenticity concerns is the idealized figure of the native speaker as the ultimate linguistic authority, an ideology that intensifies anxieties in a context where no first-language speakers remain.

One of the most profound challenges to revitalization emerges from attitudes toward power dynamics and language ownership. Some collaborators express frustration about the loss of agency in language-related decision-making, with linguistic authority increasingly concentrated in non-Ainu hands. The historical context of deliberate intergenerational silence has positioned many contemporary Ainu in the uncomfortable situation of accessing their ancestral language through non-Ainu researchers. Academic approaches that privilege documented records over living cultural knowledge and emphasize grammatical correctness over communicative function create additional tensions. However, collaborators do not reject outside involvement entirely but call for non-Ainu researchers and teachers to assume advisory rather than authoritative roles. They emphasize the importance of Ainu majority representation in policy-making bodies and community self-determination in setting goals, methods, and standards for language work. Attitudes toward non-Ainu participation show some generational patterns: younger collaborators generally welcome researchers' efforts while expecting reciprocal knowledge sharing, whereas older collaborators tend to incline toward greater skepticism about non-Ainu involvement in leading roles. The findings demonstrate that institutional language practices shaped by external authorities often conflict with the motivations and values that drive Ainu engagement with their ancestral language, and that successful revitalization and especially reclamation requires centering Ainu voices in all aspects of language work.

Conclusion

This study suggests that the collaborators' language attitudes operate across multiple interconnected dimensions, creating both opportunities and obstacles for language reclamation and modern use. Regarding the first research question about attitudes toward the Ainu language, its speakers, and language learning, the findings demonstrate predominantly positive emotional connections to Ainu, with collaborators expressing pride, protectiveness, and appreciation for the language's cultural significance. However, these positive emotions coexist with beliefs about the language's limited practical utility and concerns about linguistic authenticity, which may

prevent many collaborators from engaging in language learning. There is a gap between positive attitudes and actual linguistic behavior: while collaborators value the language symbolically and support current speakers, perfectionism, self-doubt, and fear of making mistakes keep many from pursuing language learning. The primary motivator for learning proves to be continuity motivation, the desire to connect with ancestors, yet this same motivation creates anxiety when learners perceive their speech as inauthentic. The primacy of continuity motivation and the resistance to standardization reveal that conventional language planning frameworks may misalign with community priorities, suggesting that Ainu language reclamation requires approaches that center emotional and identity-based dimensions rather than utilitarian considerations.

Regarding the second research question about attitudes toward language-related institutions, the view that Ainu have lost agency over their own language creates frustration and disengagement that transcends any specific teaching method or policy initiative. This points toward linguistic decolonization as an essential component of meaningful reclamation: restoring Ainu decision-making authority over their language, ensuring community control over modernization processes, and repositioning researchers from authorities to collaborators. These findings emerged from expanding the language attitudes framework beyond its traditional scope to include attitudes toward linguistic institutions such as language policy, linguists' authority, and teacher-learner power dynamics.

This study's theoretical contribution lies in demonstrating how institutional attitudes shape engagement with revitalization efforts in ways distinct from attitudes toward the language itself, and how institutional misalignments stem from colonial epistemologies embedded in how language work is conceptualized and controlled. The study also fills an empirical gap, offering the first systematic evidence-based insights on Ainu language attitudes collected directly from community members.

Some limitations shape the findings. My positionality as a non-Ainu foreign researcher likely influenced what collaborators chose to share, and the single-interview format captures attitudes at a specific moment rather than tracking their development. The number of collaborators is low and the fieldwork site, Biratori, is special in the sense that local Ainu identity and connection to Ainu culture has stayed stronger than in many other regions. Thus, broad generalizations about Ainu people as a whole cannot be concluded from the data.

For the aforementioned reason, future research should examine language attitudes across multiple regions. In addition, it should investigate what content and pedagogical approaches resonate with different learner profiles, and examine how Ainu wish to govern reclamation projects and what roles researchers and institutions should play. Such research must be conducted in partnership with Ainu communities and prioritize Ainu perspectives throughout.

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