

How many languages are there in Japan ?

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In 2009, UNESCO listed eight languages spoken in Japan in the Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger: Ainu, Hachijo, Amami, Kunigami, Okinawa, Miyako, Yaeyama and Yonaguni. UNESCO's reason for listing those languages as distinct from Japanese is that they are mutually unintelligible. Ainu had long been known as genetically unrelated to Japanese and had been recognized as a distinct language. The remaining seven languages, however, are genetically related and had usually been treated as 'dialects' of Japanese by Japanese scholars and the problem of mutual intelligibility had never been given a serious consideration. It is doubtful that UNESCO conducted an objective test to measure the degree of mutual intelligibility and their criteria for treating those varieties of Japanese as 'languages' rather than 'dialect' are not so obvious. In this talk I will introduce our project of designing objective tests to measure mutual intelligibility between two languages or two varieties of a language and show the results of a series of tests that we conducted in some of the languages listed above. The results show that those languages are indeed languages distinct from Japanese in the sense that they are shown to be mutually unintelligible by our mutual intelligibility tests, suggesting that contra the common belief that Japan is virtually a monolingual and mono-cultural society, it is a society with multiple languages and therefore a multi-cultural society.

We will also show that the mutual intelligibility tests can be used to measure the degree of endangerment of the language to be tested because they can measure the degree of intergenerational transmission by comparing the scores of a younger generation with an older generation. They can be a very useful diagnostic for the degree of language endangerment, which is essential in designing methods for revitalization.