

Isamu Shimoji – *Sīma-fcī* (“Miyako language”)

<http://languagesindanger.eu/book-of-knowledge/list-of-languages/miyako/>

Translation of the Japanese subtitles by Aleksandra Jarosz

sīma means literally ‘a village’ or ‘an island’, usually referring to someone’s region of origin. Thus, *sīma-fcī* as used by Isamu Shimoji could be translated as ‘our language’, or loosely as meaning ‘the Miyako language’.

My name is Isamu Shimoji. I sing songs in the Miyako language.

How are you? Before I came here I didn’t really know what I’d be talking about, but I was told that I should speak Miyako. I was surprised, but I thought that if that’s the case, then I could try to speak my hometown language, which is Hisamatsu of the Miyako main island. Then again I feel that I don’t have the confidence to talk about such broad topic, so I’m nervous if I can skillfully summarize it. Anyway, I’ll try to do my best. Our language, which is the Miyako language, today is used among elderly persons, but the generations of children and grandchildren at school are educated in standard Japanese, and when they come home, there are less and less people to talk to them in the local language. Consequently, the situation is that of youth losing the chance to hear and speak the language. If we do nothing, there is a real danger that our language could even become extinct. I realized this danger, too, and I decided I had to do something, but what exactly should this be? I admit that so far I have come up with no definite solutions. I can see that the [Okinawa] prefecture authorities can sense the danger too, they too know that with no support the local languages will disappear. And so they have introduced the “local language day” (*Sīma-kutuba-no hi*) ordinance, and the occasions to teach the kids their local language at schools etc. have grown. Needless to say, such initiatives are of course much better than sitting around doing nothing. On the other hand, however, I feel that such top-down movements will make the kids treat their local language education just like any other home assignment, like a kind of a school duty, some kind of burden. And if this happens, the matters can’t be expected to go in the right direction. This is my honest opinion.

Me, I sing songs in the Miyako language. I record them on CDs which are then sold in the whole country [= Japan]. I do this because I want the language to last for the future generations. Actually I don't have the feeling that it's my duty or anything. What I mean is just that there is a world that can only be described with the Miyako language. A world which no Japanese words could express, a world which cannot be translated into Japanese. This is a kind of culture that lives within a language. And so I sing with the intention to convey this world in my songs.

One more thing is the sound of the language. Those special Miyako-only words that are nowhere else to find all over the world. They just sound cool. That's why I want to sing in our language. And if, say, some child says: "Wow, so Isamu Shimoji sings in the Miyako language! I can't understand anything, but doesn't it sound cool?", then maybe, starting with such small motivation, first they'll hum along, then their fascination will grow deeper, and perhaps in this way we could make the language last a little longer. That's what I think. If we can record CDs like that, or write the books, or pick the *mozuku* seaweed, but instead of selling them with the "*mozuku*" label we sell them with their local name "*sunuzu*", the impression would be much stronger. Likewise, if we sell the sea grapes [Jap. *umibudō*] not as the "sea grapes", but with their local name *nkjafu*, the tourists may be surprised: "Japanese words can't begin with the /N/ sound, can they?", and thus, intrigued, they will surely reach out for them. And when they read on the package that the content is the sea grapes, they think "ah, so it's the sea grapes! Might as well buy one, then". It seems to me that we could in this way combine the language promotion activities with business.

To sum up, under the danger that the language may become extinct, it won't hurt to develop a top-down maintenance system, but I believe that the important thing is rather to create for the kids such an environment where they can subjectively feel compelled to face the challenge and learn the many expressions which cannot be translated into any other language, which are nowhere else to be found, which preserve the sound of this one island alone. These are the very reasons why I speak our language, so when I have a live concert or something, I'd really like you to come and enjoy the world of songs in the Miyako language to your heart's content. Thank you very much.